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THE IDOL'S EYE;

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PROLOGUE.

I.

Alone in the Jungle—The Tiger's Claw—The Parsee's Daughter.

HEET-EET-EET! Pheet!



The shrill scream of the whistle quivered through the shimmering heat of the jungle. The Central Provinces badly needed the refreshing rains of the monsoon. A glaring sun beat down mercilessly on the scorched profusion of cactus, wisteria, and parasitical undergrowth, making the drooping plumes of the palms hang wilted as from dead, gigantic birds, and drawing from the mangrove swamp a heavy, stagnant odour.

Pheet-eet!

Through an opening between the lofty peepul trees a range of mauve-tinted hills reared against a cloudless sky, and from their naked slopes came the howls of jackals and the chattering laugh of a hyena as he led the hungry pack to the valleys below in search of food. Countless insects droned in the honey-laden, brilliantly-hued flora, and the brushwood rustled occasionally with the passage of hissing cobra, grunting wild boar, or prowling cheetah.

Came the sound of the whistle again, and suddenly the brushwood parted to reveal two lithe, copper-skinned Hindoos as they lashed the densest of the thickets with stout staves.

And from ahead came a coughing roar as a tiger, awakened from its gorged siesta, restlessy paced its lair.

The shrill blast of the whistle had signalled the beaters to stop; and now a white man, clad in serviceable drill, with knee-boots, and a pith helmet tilted over his eyes, made his way towards them.

Tall, bronzed, and lean, with fair hair and steadfast blue eyes, Edward Hartley looked every inch an adventurous, sports-loving Britisher.

The younger son of a baronet, with little prospect of inheriting the family estates in Essex, he had long since tired of the conventional rounds of a man about town, and twelve months before had booked a passage on one of the British-India boats for Bombay. After a tour of the south he was now trekking northwards through the Central Provinces to the big game preserves of the swampy Punjab, accompanied by his two faithful beaters of the Bhil tribe, who worshipped him—next to their numerous and varied gods—above all things on earth.

Sport in the Central Provinces at this period—some twenty years ago—was plentiful, and Hartley, shooting in the Wuddar style (on foot), had met with fair success; then news had come from the elders of a near-by village—at which he had rested—of a mammoth, cattle-killing tiger that had been known to kill a man in pure sport.

Thinking the opportunity too good to be lost, Hartley had wasted no time in getting his beaters on the man-killer's track. After days of patient jungle-craft he now seemed within an ace of success, and the reckless blue eyes sparkled with eagerness as he reached the beaters.

"You have done well," he said, in Hindustani. "Take you the left, Khar, and you, Moulla Rahl, the right. Work carefully round its lair, and when I give you the signal, drive towards the clearing yonder. I will await with my rifle."

The dark, soft eyes of Moulla Rahl looked troubled.

"As the sahib commands," he said, in an uneasy voice. "But I beg of you to use caution, master. This is no mangy tigress worn with nursing, or broken-toothed old male. But one of such size"—he pointed to the imprint of an enormous five-clawed "pug" in a patch of earth—"that even I, sahib, who have beaten the Satpura Hills and preserves of Bengal for the Royal sahibs have never beheld greater than the sabre-tooth that lurks yonder to kill." A

"Your words are wise, Rahl, and I will remember," Hartley said; and as the beaters slipped quietly through the jungle, he made his way to the clearing, the joy of battle in his eyes, that smile of pure recklessness on his lips which made those who loved Edward Hartley fear for him.

Dropping to one knee he examined his rifle, and after a brief pause blew his whistle for the drive to commence.

As the raucous shouts of the beaters rang out they were answered by a menacing snarl. Rather than forsake its lair the "king of the Indian jungle" was prepared to battle for its life. Then came a violent crashing of undergrowth and brushwood, a hoarse cry of fear, followed by a scream of agony and terror that died into a whimpering moan.

Hartley, his face pale, leapt to his feet. He knew what that scream meant, and as he ran forward he fired his rifle, hoping to scare the enraged animal from the unfortunate beater. But scarcely had the hills ceased to echo the shot than another scream rang out, this time trailing into an agony-wrung death cry.

Hartley hastily reloaded his rifle and paused for a moment, uncertain of action; then a crash, followed by a menacing growl, sounded to his left and he hastily turned. Before him, with head bowed to the ground, the luminous green eyes burning under the heavy brows, crouched the tiger, silky-coated, full-bellied, and deep-jowled.

The unwinking green eyes never left the man's face. It was the deadly jungle mesmerism that the "sabre-tooth" had practised often on his quarry, and although Hartley was by no means a terrified jungle hare, he stood for a few seconds, held by the oddity of the attack.

Then, with a strained laugh, he jerked the rifle to his shoulder and fired between the devilish eyes.

There was a growl of pain, a quivering of the lithe, sinewy body, and the furry mass, reeking of carrion, sprang. Hartley felt a searing, agonising pain as the cruel claws, dripping with blood of the unfortunate beaters, bit deeply into his flesh, and he toppled backwards beneath the heavy carcase. As he lay beneath, the tiger, game to the last, raised its paw for a finishing blow. But the burning eyes glazed, the paw wagged foolishly; then, with a final, convulsive kick, the animal lay dead.

For a time there was silence, until one by one the startled animals returned to their lay-byes. For hours the white man lay motionless. The hills became wrapped in the opal haze of night and the sinking sun lit up the western sky with flaming gold and crimson. With tropical suddenness the jungle was plunged into darkness, and the Indian night, broken by its minute noises, hung over them, as oppressive as the heat. The bush was very quiet but uncannily alive. The moon climbed slowly into the star-spangled heavens, bathing the grim scene with a soft light, and from the shadows crept a beautiful spotted cheetah.

Sniffing hungrily at the reek of blood, the graceful creature circled cautiously round the

still figures; then, lifting its snout, whined out its eerie, cat-like call, which was answered in the distance by its mate.

"Sahib! Sahib!"

There was a crashing of dried brushwood and the cheetah sprang back into the undergrowth with a startled growl as the faithful Moulla Rahl staggered drunkenly into the clearing.

The brown flesh of breast and loin was terribly lacerated, and the tattered dhoti, wrapped about his loins, covered with blood. But with a courage as great as his strength was weak, the gallant Bhil reached his master's side, only to fall face downward beside him.

The cold sweat was already commencing to steal out in great beads on the brown limbs, but in the lion heart of the Hindoo was a love for his master that would not admit defeat. Struggling gamely to his feet he stooped, over the white man, and as gently as possible, grasped the torn and bleeding shoulders. With an effort that sent the agony-wrung sweat streaming down his body, he drew Hartley from beneath the crushing weight of the tiger, and when the white man faintly stirred and groaned, Moulla Rahl's dimming eyes lit up with joy.

Unknotting the dhoti from his waist, he crawled to a tiny jungle stream and rinsed out the bloodstains in the cool water. When he returned he tore it into strips, bathing and dressing his master's wounds as best he could. Finally, satisfied with his task, he squatted by the white man's side and chanted weirdly to his gods.

The night dragged on; from the mangrove-swamp came a cold white mist, and with the mist came the mosquitoes. Moulla Rahl knew that for white men the fierce little tormentors meant fever and perhaps death.

Picking up a fallen palm leaf, he fanned the buzzing horde from the motionless figure.

As the first flush of dawn coloured the eastern sky Hartley stirred uneasily, and after a wild glance at the stiffening bulk of the tiger, looked at his beater with sane and seeing eyes.

"Good man, Rahl!" He stretched out his hand as he spoke in faint tones, and the lean, brown fingers clasped it timidly. "When the sun rises higher, take the revolver from my belt and fire three shots. The signal may be heard. In any case, it is our only chance. What of poor Khar?"

"Sahib, Khar is dead!"

Though realising the hopelessness of the effort, Hartley made an attempt to get to his feet, but with a groan of pain, sank limply back.

"I am sorry," he muttered. "Sorry—to have led you—into this." He closed his eyes. "Rahl, it was the sabre-tooth's fight, I fear—victory even in death!"

With stoic calm Moulla Rahl squatted by his master's side, fighting against the deadly weakness that was threatening to overpower him. Before the sun rose much higher the gallant beater knew that he would be dead, but with the tenacity of the Bhils—a tribe famous wherever shikar (big-game shooting) is followed—he held on to life.

When an hour had passed he took the Webley & Scott from his master's belt, and, lifting his arm into the air, rapidly fired three shots—the white man's signal of distress known throughout India. The hills, taking up the reports, sent them echoing through the valleys below.

The distress signal was followed only by silence, and, each kick of the revolver sending a spasm of agony through his tortured arms, Rahl fired again after a reasonable pause. Six times in all fired Rahl, then, faintly in the distance, sounded the rolling beat of tom-toms. The signal had been heard.

Rahl's dark eyes flickered with a light of joy, and, seizing the whistle from his master's belt, he blew blast after blast in order to give the rescuers their direction.

When the sound of the tom-toms of the approaching party could be plainly heard, Moulla Rahl, faithful unto death, gave up the life he had clung to for his master's sake; and with one profound salaam to his gods, toppled sideways into the grass and lay still.

The undergrowth parted, and into the clearing trotted a party of low-caste Hindoos, followed at a more leisurely pace by a tall man of dignified appearance, flowing white beard and cream-coloured flesh. On his snow-white head he wore the black, shining helmet of the Parsees—not unlike a bishop's mitre. His legs were wrapped in a silk dhoti of exquisite design and texture; and over his embroidered shirt, fastened with jewelled studs, he wore the long, black surcoat affected by his caste.

Josef Agran, one of the native merchant princes of India, had just completed a tour of the district, bartering for rugs, jewels, and carvings of ancient workmanship, of which most native villages, poor and famine-stricken though they may be, contain a goodly store. With caravan, pack-mules, and servants he had been following the winding, beaten road that ran through the jungle, some two miles to the east of the tragic scene, when, hearing the signal shots of the faithful Rahl, he had read its message of distress.

As his eyes fell upon the still figures, Josef Agran uttered a sharp cry of pity, and running forward, knelt by Hartley's side. After a cursory examination the Parsee turned to his servants, who were gazing from awe-stricken eyes at the beautiful body of the huge tiger.

"Make a litter of branches quickly, for the white man lives!" he commanded rapidly.

And as the natives set about their task he took from his girdle a gourd of potent Indian spirit.

With gentle hands he lifted the blood-stained head to his knee and put the gourd to the scarred lips. Hartley spluttered convulsively for a moment, then opened his eyes.

"Easy, my friend," Agran bade gently, as the Englishman made an effort to rise. "You are well with friends. Do not move. Soon I will have you carried to my caravan that stands in the jungle path, and my madah, who is well versed in the art of medicine, shall attend you."

With faint words of thanks Hartley looked gratefully into the kindly face of the Parsee. Then he saw the huddled figure of Rahl, and his blue eyes dimmed.

"If any of your bearers are of the true Hindoo caste, please bid them build a funeral pyre and cremate the bodies of my bearers according to the rites of their caste," he said sadly. "It would be their earnest wish could they voice it. I cannot leave their bodies to the beasts of the jungle. They were faithful unto death."

"It shall be done," Agran said gravely, and with a weary sigh of pain Hartley drifted back into unconsciousness.

At length the litter was constructed, and when the funeral pyre of the bearers was well alight, the procession, preceded by two of the bearers, who beat down the undergrowth for them to pass, made its way to the jungle path.

When they reached the caravan an ebony-skinned syce left the team of little switch-tailed kabuli ponies, and, opening the door, assisted the bearers to carry the limp figure to a pile of silk cushions which lay strewn about its luxurious interior.

"Fetch the madah quickly," bade Agran.

And with a respectful salaam the syce trotted off, returning in a few minutes with the Madah, a shrivelled old man with a white, flowing beard.

The medicine bag of his calling was strapped across his bony chest, and as he bent over the recumbent figure of Hartley he muttered and nodded with an air of profound wisdom.

"The sahib's illness will be long," he said. "But he will live."

In a quavering voice he ordered the syce to light the kerosene oil-stove, and, filling a brass lotah with water, he carefully removed the coarse linen bandages from the white man's wounds, while he waited for the water to boil. When it was hissing and bubbling in the lotah he took a bunch of dried leaves from his bag and a roll of fine linen bandages. Placing the leaves in the water, he stirred them for some minutes with a bamboo rod. A pungent but not unpleasant odour filled the room.

He tore some of the linen into strips when the infusion had cooled to his satisfaction, and soaked the strips in the herbal brew, wringing them half out, then placed them carefully over Hartley's wounds and bandaged firmly.

Satisfied with his task, he stepped back and addressed his master.

"It is well, sahib," he quavered respectfully. "The white man's wounds, although deep and ragged, are not fatal. They will now heal cleanly. When he is conscious, give him a little food, and then this potion in the phial, for it brings sleep and ease from pain."

Josef Agran nodded, and drew a curtain of chopped and dyed reeds across the divan. Then he dismissed the madah and bade his servants continue the journey.

It was not until dusk had fallen, and the caravan was halted beneath the shade of the deepol trees for the night, that Hartley stirred.

The soft-footed Agran was immediately at his side, carrying a gourd of goat's milk.

"Drink this," he said softly, as the blue eyes opened; "then I will have some food prepared for you."

After Hartley had sipped some of the cool, refreshing milk, Agran left the caravan, and when he returned he brought a bowl of boiled goat's flesh. Eating a little, Hartley felt stronger.

"I don't know who you are," he said in a weak voice. "But I'm infernally grateful to you. I met my Waterloo in the beast you saw lying beside me." He shuddered. "What would have happened if you had not found me I don't dare to think. Vultures, cheetahs, and jakals are not timid when they scent a helpless man. But what of you, my friend?"

The Parsee squatted beside him.

"My name is Josef Agran, and I am a dealer in precious stones," he said. "I was on my way home to the village of Kudderal when I heard your signals. It is some days' journey from here. I intend taking you to the house of an Englishman who is commissioner of the district there. His wife will nurse you, and you will get food and attention according to the manner of your race."

"It's thundering good of you," Hartley said gratefully. "But tell me, how is it you speak my lingo so well?"

"I was educated at the college of Madras, after the English fashion," said Agran. "And I deal much with your race at my shop in the Parsee bazaar at Bombay. Speak not of your gratitude, my friend. An Englishman once saved my life, and any service I can do you will help to repay the great debt I owe to your race. But I shall tire you with my chatter. Drink this, and sleep."

He held the phial the Madah had left to Hartley's lips, and soon the white man closed his eyes.

When his even breathing told Agran that he slept, he dropped a mosquito-net over him and quietly summoned the punkah-wallah. As the native squatted in the corner and pulled the ropes of the big fan-like punkah, the cool air circled round the caravan, and, stretching himself upon a reed mat, the Parsee went to sleep.

At noon of the third day the jungle grew sparser, and soon they were travelling over an expanse of sun-blit desolation, with several roads straggling in various directions. A little later that evening they reached the village of Kudderal, with its rows of mud-and-wattle huts, intersected here and there by comparatively lordly dak-bungalows.

The hot, roughly-made streets were filled with chattering natives, ramshackle "gharries" and oxen waggons, and the shouts of fruit sellers and water carriers sounded on every side.

Children, clad in little garments of coloured prints, ran beside them, soliciting alms, to the accompaniment of the jingling bangles which gleamed upon their brown arms and ankles.

Leaving the native quarters behind they mounted an incline, and the better-class houses, painted pink, blue, and yellow, gleamed in the sunlight. Some hours later they drew up before a stately residence of white stone that lay beneath a clump of lofty palm and peepul trees.

The reed curtains covering the arcade that ran along the front of the house were suddenly dashed aside, and a slim, girlish figure ran lightly down the steps.

She wore an underrock of white, embroidered satin, covered by a silk saree of beautiful design, and gold and jewelled bangles of ancient workmanship tinkled musically on her creamy-white arms. Her poise was one of youthful grace and beauty.

"Father!" cried the girl.

The red lips curved in a smile of joy as Agran descended from the caravan. The next minute she was in his arms.

"How glad I am to see you home again, my father!" she cried gaily, in as perfect English as Agran's own. "Has all gone well?"

"With us, yes," Agran said, as he kissed her. "But out in the jungle we came across a man of the English race who was badly mauled by a tiger. His beaters were dead, so we carried him to the caravan and brought him here: In the morning I must take him to the house of the nearest commissioner, for there he will have the food and comforts of his race."

The beautiful face of the Parsee girl filled with compassion as she peeped into the caravan and saw the lacerated and bandaged face of the sleeping man.

"But, my father, why should the poor Englishman go to the house of the commissioner? My ayah, who was of his race, taught me to cook and nurse as they do in his country."

Agran looked troubled, and nervously plucked his beard.

"The laws of caste are stronger than the laws of friendship, Zenda," he said slowly. "This man is not of our race."

Zenda's beautiful eyes clouded.

"But what difference does that make?" she cried appealingly. "We are true worshippers of our Temple, but we respect the English, who have built up our railways and our commerce. Remember, too, my father, that a brave Englishman once saved your life. It would be but a poor return if we sent this injured stranger from us in his hour of need. The household of the commissioner is distant, and the journey may rob him of his chance of life. Father, let him stay, and I will nurse him," Zenda pleaded.

Agran hesitated. But the reminder that he owed his life to one of the derelict's race was a strong appeal. He bade his servants carry the white man into the house.

And as the litter was borne in Hartley opened heavy eyes, to behold, looking down at him compassionately, the loveliest face he had yet seen on earth, and to wonder if he were truly dead, and if this was the first angel come to welcome him to Paradise.

II.

An Indian Romance—The Mystic Ruby.

A CLOUD of dust swirled from the white road as a steaming kabuli pony, pulled up short on its haunches, halted outside the house of Josef Agran. Its rider slipped from the brass-studded saddle and tethered the animal to the trunk of a palm-tree.

The age of the rider was about thirty. His forehead bore the red-painted mark of the Hindoo caste. Clad in a robe of white, his brown face, with its growth of straggling beard, was crowned with a multi-coloured turban.

Reaching the shade of the veranda he dropped into a bamboo chair and clanged the copper gong that stood on a table by his side.

A sleepy-eyed ayah answered his summons.

"My greetings to the mem-sahib Zenda," he said, speaking in Hindustani, and in a harsh, forbidding voice. "Tell her I crave an interview with her."

The ayah hurried off on her mission, and shortly afterwards Zenda came slowly down towards the native visitor with a look of distaste in her golden-brown eyes.

"Greetings, Bhur Singh!" she said coldly. "What is your mission? Do you desire to do business with my father?"

Bhur Singh's piercing black eyes flickered with admiration as they dwelt on the beautiful face of the Parsee girl. He salammated, then, straightening himself, regarded her with mingled passion and pleading in his haughty face.

"My business with your father will wait, Zenda," said he slowly. "Be seated—there is much I wish to say to you, peerless one."

Although the girl acceded to his wish, and sat down, the aloofness in her manner brought a glitter to Bhur Singh's eyes.

"How fares it with your Englishman?" he asked. Then, with a badly-veiled sneer: "I have no doubt that, under your devoted care and attention, Hartley Sahib is now restored to health?"

"Hartley Sahib is better," Zenda replied, a trace of defiance in her voice, in whose musical tones the man jealously detected a note of regret. "Soon he will leave us for Bombay, to return to his own country."

The thin, bearded lips of the Hindoo tightened.

"It is well," he said grimly. "I have no liking for these Christians—nor is it fitting that they should associate with you, Zenda!" He leaned forward suddenly and caught her hands. "No—do not turn from me, my beautiful Zenda. Surely you have guessed that I came not to see your father, but to tell you of my love!"

Drawing her hand from him sharply, the girl rose to her feet, her creamy-white face flushed with anger, but soon paling to fear as she saw the passion in the evil eyes of Bhur Singh. She had long feared this moment with him, for, an

educated Hindoo, of good birth, and a student for the Indian law, he had both power and influence in the district—even greater than her father's own.

Yet between those two stretched the mystic barrier of caste.

"Your words are an insult, Bhur Singh!" cried the Parsee maiden proudly. "You, a Hindoo, and worshipper at Kali's shrine, to speak of love to one of my faith! Are you mad to think that I would change my caste for yours—aye, even though I loved you—which I do not, and never shall?"

Bhur Singh rose, his black eyes aglitter, as the sting of the scornful words sank home.

"Does it lie so?" he said in low and menacing tones. "Beware, Zenda! Already the gossips of the bazaars are coupling your name with that of this Christian. Perhaps rumour does not lie! Is it for one of Hartley Sahib's foreign faith that you scorn my religion and my love?"

The passion in his face caused the now frightened girl to glance back towards the house, as though contemplating flight. Seeing her intention, the Hindoo seized her by one fair, white arm.

"Go, Bhur Singh!" panted Zenda. "Go—or I will order my father's servants to whip you from our doors. How dare you—"

She shuddered, Bhur Singh was smiling the evil smile of unleashed jealousy. The scorn in her voice, the alluring beauty of her face, drove him beyond reason for the moment, and he struggled to draw her closer into his dusky arms.

"Help!" Her cry rang out suddenly, sharply. And Bhur Singh started; he knew that her father usually slept at this hour, and believed that Hartley was absent from the house.

"Help—Hartley Sahib!" cried the girl again. Came the swift patter of feet on the paved floor, and, crossing the verandah, with a cry of anger, Hartley's stout arm shot outward. With a cry Bhur Singh sagged to his knees, having felt the weight of a British fist.

It was three months since Hartley had been borne to the Parsee's house from the jungle, and though still pale after his long illness, he had regained much of his strength.

"Get up, you black scum!" he thundered angrily. "Get up and clear, or—"

The Hindoo had leapt lithely to his feet; his hand went swiftly to his girdle, and there was the flash of steel. Murder gleamed ugly in his eyes as he crouched, and with a cry of terror Zenda flung herself between the two men.

But Hartley's hand placed her gently behind him.

"Draw on me, would you, you scum!" he said hotly. "You want a lesson—and by James you shall have it, too! Draw on a white man, would you—"

With a spring he was on the Hindoo. A powerful hand gripped the man's arm above the elbow—the knife arm—and Hartley locked his leg around the foe. Backward and forward they swayed, the Englishman never relax- ing

that vice-like grip. Then, with a quick movement, he jerked the Hindoo's arm behind his back. A minute's agony the man suffered gamely, then with a moan he let the knife clatter to the floor.

Hartley gazed at the defeated one with a grin of serene cheerfulness.

"I'm going to give you a thundering good hiding for playing with knives, my dusky friend," he said. Then, turning his head towards the girl: "Run in, Zenda, and send the eye with the tonga-whip—this gentleman needs a lesson in that respect which he should show to women—and he shall have one."

Zenda's tender heart made her hesitate, but she saw the gleam of amusement in Hartley's eyes, and understood. Hartley held the Hindoo till the eye came out bearing the tonga-whip, then he released him. Hartley took the whip and the long lash cracked as he tested it.

Bhur Singh, with a yell of fury and terror, bolted down the garden. Not the lash, but the degradation of it, was what he dreaded, as Hartley well knew. The Hindoo untied his pony and, scrambling into the saddle, spurred into a mad gallop, turning to shake his fist at the laughing white man.

"Hartley Sahib, one day you and yours shall pay for this insult, if fate gives the chance into my hands!" he yelled. "Bhur Singh never forgets!"

"Wish I didn't," laughed Hartley, as he retraced his steps, whip still in hand. "Thought that would settle his old hash, Zenda."

But the girl laid her hand on his arm, and her face was like death.

"Oh, take care. He is a dangerous man!" Her voice was trembling—trembling with anxiety for him! It gave Hartley a glad throb of the heart as he looked at her.

How fair she was—fairer, he thought, than many Europeans, this lovely Eastern maid. Speaking perfectly his own tongue, with the culture of the Indian college lady, it had often been difficult for him to realise that she was not of his own blood and race.

"I don't fear the chap, Zenda," he said softly. "But—" He paused. "Do you forget that to-morrow we have to say good-bye?"

"Do I forget?" she whispered, and in her voice was the sadness that now ate into the man's heart. Hartley knew that the parting from this sweet-natured girl would cruelly wrench his heart.

For those months he had been in her keeping had brought romance into the lives of those two; Bhur Singh's jealousy had not been baseless, and the Parsee bride he had long coveted had given her heart to this lover of blue eyes and northern blood.

"You have been very good to me, little Zenda," he said, as he drew her on the stone seat beside him. "I owe my life to you!"

"To my father, who found you," she said softly.

"And to you, who nursed me back from death."

Day was slowly merging into tropical night.

A strained silence fell upon them both. A feeling new, and strange, and sweet, was stirring Hartley's blood to something akin to madness—the madness of a love that was stronger than the traditions of family and of race.

The big, red sun sank slowly into the purple haze of the west, instantly transforming the sky into a riot of amber, mauve, and the crimson of molten rubies.

Heavy with the scent of orange groves, a soft wind—the intoxicating Indian night wind—rustled in the feathery palms. Humming birds of brilliant hues hovered over the Indian cresses and trumpet-flowers. From the village came the soft roll of tom-toms, the thrumming of stringed instruments, and bursts of Indian songs—bizarre, passionate, and beautiful.

It was a garden of enchantment. To-night Edward Hartley felt much of its magic spell. The brief season of happiness was ended. To-morrow he would be gone, and nothing but memories would be left. He turned and looked at her as she sat, flecked with the silver light of the moon, a slender figure against a background of lichen stone.

Their eyes met, and it seemed to the young man that something was dawning in her heart which caused his own to throb responsively.

"Zenda," he whispered, "it's more than I can bear to think of parting for ever from you. I can't realise it. Part—without a hope of ever meeting again, for my days in India are done!"

Hearing her quivering sigh, that was like a sob, he passionately caught her hands.

"I love you," he said simply. "I have from that first day, when I thought myself dying—or dead—and you came to me, like—the first angel to welcome me into the great Valhalla. Don't send me away from you, Zenda—I can't go alone! Marry me—come back to England with me as my wife!"

"You—you know it can't be," breathed the girl. "My faith is not yours. And my vows! Father would never consent. It would mean ostracism for the rest of my life—and for yours. For neither my people nor yours—"

"Zenda, darling, tell me one thing—do you love me?"

"I love you—yes. Oh, yes!" Her voice was low music. "But— Oh, my dear—"

"Listen," he said, and he crushed her to his heart and kissed her lips. "I will make any sacrifice for you, my darling. I know there is only one way, and I will take it. I will become of your own faith—"

"Oh, no—you cannot, must not—"

"I will! Love and you are more precious to me than aught in the world," he said. "And it is the only way your father would consent to, I know. Come, and we will go to him now."

The old reckless light was shining in his eyes. He was not narrow-minded enough to think that the religion of other races must needs be less noble than his own. Yet his face was white as he kissed the lips of his love once more, and led her back into the house.

Josef Agran was squatting on a pile of cushions when they entered, Hartley leading

Zenda into the old merchant's private apartment. Rising, Hartley was courteously motioned to a seat on the divan.

"Full arrangements have been made for your journey, Hartley Sahib," Agran said. "We shall be sorry to lose our guest. I will accompany you as far as Rhanpur. Thence a compartment has been reserved for you to Bombay."

Hartley looked with gratitude at the venerable, wrinkled face of the Parsee.

"You have been a generous friend," he said in a low voice. "And as your reward, it seems that I must now seek to rob you of your dearest possession. Zenda and I love each other, and I have come to ask your consent to our marriage. I am willing to embrace your faith."

Agran looked at them, but there was no expression of displeasure on his kindly face. Perhaps he had not been wholly blind to the romance that had followed the coming of this Englishman.

"Are you aware of what our religion is?" he gravely asked. "It is not to be lightly regarded, the step you contemplate."

Hartley shook his head; he knew but little of such matters. And the old man continued:

"We are not of the Indian races. Descendants of the one-time great Ayran race of Central Asia, that accounts for the whiteness of our skin. I, who am an old man, have grown yellow with the suns of India, but Zenda has the fair colouring of your own white women almost."

"Our race emigrated to India many hundreds of years ago, and the country owes much of its prosperity to our labour and enterprise. Our deities are the sun, water, and the earth. Because of our reverence for the earth we erected our 'Towers of Silence,' in order that our dead might not desecrate the earth, and we suffer our bodies to be devoured by the vultures on the tower gratings. Yet in spite of this we worship the true God of creation, known to us as Ormuzd. Think well before you decide."

"I have decided," Hartley said gravely and firmly. "My faith shall be that of the woman I love."

"Zenda, do you love this man?"

"My father!" Her voice faltered. "Life without his love would be as a long night without a star."

Agran was silent for some minutes. Then he rose and placed his hands affectionately on the white man's shoulders.

"My son," he said with emotion, "I consent. I am old, and not long for this world, and it would be unjust if I denied my daughter her happiness in order that she should stay to comfort my declining years. I will send a runner to the Temple of Ormuzd, so that the head magi may prepare for your conversion and marriage ceremony. It is my dearest wish that you marry and sail for England immediately, as some of the fanatics of our creed do not look favourably upon inter-racial unions, and it would be dangerous for you to remain here."

He left Hartley and crossed over to Zenda. The girl clung tenderly to him.

"If I could allow Zenda to take up your faith I would," he resumed; "but we cannot break our temple vows, for to us of the East they are dearer than life itself. Zenda has been my dearest possession since her mother died, and India, gorgeous and beautiful though the setting is, is sordid and vice-stricken. Because of that I have long cherished a desire that one day my daughter would marry an Englishman and go back with him to his own country, for there your women are treated with chivalry. Then so let it be."

He kissed the girl fondly, and went back to the divan.

Silently they left the room, and for a long time the old man sat motionless, his shoulders bowed. At length he rose and crossed over to a brass-bound chest that stood in a curtained alcove. He unlocked it, and, taking out a goat-skin bag, walked over to the table and emptied the contents on the tapestry cloth.

On the table now lay a small heap of jewels that caught the flickering light of the kerosene lamps and flung back a thousand gleaming shafts of colour. Amongst the poorer stones flamed one huge, blood-red ruby of many facets, a magnificent gem, worthy of a setting in a king's crown. Agran's face paled, and he glanced almost furtively towards the open window as he pressed it to his heart.

"For years have I basked in thy lustrous beauty," he muttered in the Ayran tongue; "but now thou shalt be the marriage dowry of my beautiful Zenda. In the new land whither she goes thou shalt, whatever befall her, preserve her from want. Cunning old bargainer and faithless as Margha was, I met him, cunning for cunning, for thy possession!"

This neither Hartley nor Zenda heard.

Soon after the first flush of dawn had tinted the eastern sky the caravan started on its journey, and after many hours of travelling over sun-scorched, boulder-strewn plains they arrived at Rhanpur.

Outside the station, thronged with picturesque, chattering natives, they halted, and when Agran had given instructions to the driver they made their way to the train.

At Bombay they found a private gharri, drawn by a team of plumed and decorated Arabian horses, awaiting them, and they drove towards the Temple of Ormuzd.

Leaving the wide, sweeping streets, flanked by stately buildings, behind, they were soon in the midst of densely-populated native quarters.

The cobbled streets were crowded with tonga-waggons drawn by teams of hump-backed oxen, smiling, chattering men clad in multi-coloured loin-cloths and turbans, and native women, their sarrees drawn across their mouths, with tall brass lotahs upon their heads.

Merchants and pedlars squatted down upon the narrow pavements, with their merchandise set out before them; fruit-sellers with huge slices of ruby-seeded melons, mangoes and

pinex; spice merchants with piles of amber, saffron, and red-tinted spices set out upon white cloths; dentists and bone-setters, sellers of ivory, curios and silks.

The gharry, with clanging gong, at length entered the quieter quarters inhabited by the Parsees. Here stately residences of sculptured stone studded with mosaic patterns, lined the streets, and fair-skinned men and women, swathed in costly sarees, cheered the bridal procession as it trotted by.

Finally they drew up before the Temple of Ormuzd, and a venerable-looking magi, swathed in his white priestal robes, came forward and led them through the lofty arches to the altar.

The temple, decorated with designs of mosaic and costly tapestries, and studded with rich carvings of cedar-wood and stone, was dimly lit and deserted, for Agran had ordered the ceremony to be a quiet one.

Hartley and the Parsee girl knelt down, side by side, before the gilded altar, and, following the responses of the priest, Hartley took the vows.

Afterward, the marriage ceremony, solemnised by the priest in an ancient Persian dialect, was interpreted to him by Agran.

The ceremony over, they re-entered the gharry and were driven to the Alexandra Docks, where a stately liner, her white paint gleaming in the sun, rode at anchor. Joseph Agran, omitting nothing, had booked their passages aboard the boat.

Quartermasters were already shouting for the passengers to hurry aboard, and one of the gangways was being hauled up on deck when they arrived.

Zenda clung tearfully to her father, and the scene being painful to Hartley, he left father and daughter alone for a moment, and directed a steward as to their luggage.

"Do not grieve, my daughter," Agran said gently. "It is for your own happiness that you leave me. Here is your marriage dowry. Amongst the stones you will find a large ruby. You must not let it be seen in India! It is for your safe future, Zenda. Should ill befall you in a foreign land it will preserve you from want. But guard it as a secret, since it has itself a secret which may well make its ruby redness be as a blood-drop from a faithless heart!"

A bell on the ship's bridge rang harshly. Hartley hurried forward to take his farewell of the large-hearted old man, and then they hurried up the gangway.

With screaming siren the ship steamed slowly from the quayside and out into the sparkling blue expanse of the Indian ocean.

When Bombay became swathed and hidden in the haze of distance Zenda lifted her beautiful face to her husband's adoring eyes.

"You will never regret the vows you have taken, Edward?" she asked gently.

Hartley gazed out over the ocean for a moment; then he fondly kissed her. Already he felt remorse at being a renegade from his faith but love had been stronger than all.

And over them brooded the sinister shadow of Bhur Singh's vow of vengeance—though it was not until many years had passed that the Hindoo's shadow was to fall upon Zenda's path again, and the mysterious ruby bring tragedy into the life of the Parsee bride.

End of Prologue.

CHAPTER 1.

Twenty Years Afterwards—The Betrothal Gift—The Face at the Window.

"A TELEGRAM, sir," said Mrs. Bardell, Sexton Blake's housekeeper. "And of all the cheeky and owdacious young varmint as brought it—"

"Thank you, Mrs. Bardell." Sexton Blake looked up languidly from the book of travels he had been reading, and took the buff-coloured envelope from a red-faced and very indignant old lady's hand, Mrs. Bardell yielding it with a resentful snort at the interruption.

It was late afternoon at the famous criminologist's rooms in Baker Street. After a quiet day in an unusually quiet week, Tinker, Sexton Blake's clever young assistant, reclined upon a couch, having at the moment no more edifying occupation for idle hands than tickling the ears of Pedro, the bloodhound, that famous sleuth who in his career had made almost as many friends—and foes—as Blake himself.

The peaceful quiet of the sitting-room had been suddenly broken by a peal on the bell below, followed by muffled sounds of conversation, punctuated by shrill exclamations of indignation. Then had come the heavy footsteps of Mrs. Bardell on the stairs, and her flushed appearance with the "wire."

"A cheeky young varmint!" continued Mrs. Bardell, raising her voice, as one determined to have her say. "Arks me if this was the place of the famous detective, Sexton Blake, as could trace anything what was lost. As innocent as a child, I says 'Yes,' and what does the owdacious young himp do but devise me to permission you to trace me long-lost beauty! And for no more than telling him to take 'is muddy hoofs off my clean step!'"

A sound suspiciously like a chuckle came from the couch, and with wrathful mien Mrs. Bardell marched out of the room, closing the door with unnecessary violence in protest.

As Blake took up a paper-knife and slit open the envelope, Tinker sat up expectantly.

"Hope it's something exciting, guv'nor," he said. "I've been hoping something would turn up, if only the mysterious poisoning of Lady de Vere Plantaganet's favourite tabby. Things have been pretty dull lately. What's the latest?"

"I am afraid your craving for abnormal excitement will not be gratified on this occasion," Sexton Blake said. "It is an invitation from Sir John Currier, C.B., a very old and esteemed friend of mine, who is giving a betrothal dinner at Wierdale Court, his Surrey house, in honour of his son's engagement.

Young Jim Currier is a fine young fellow, recently called to the Bar, Tinker, and—"

"Oh, I remember, guv'nor," Tinker said. "Wasn't he the young barrister you helped on the Bothwell case a year ago?"

"The same, my boy. And although Sir John has not given us much time in which to prepare we will not disappoint him. Ring up the garage people, and ask them to have the Grey Panther round in an hour's time."

Tinker went to the phone and ordered the car. A drive into the country, with a dinner at the other end of it—to say nothing of a peep at Society's latest bride-to-be—was better than an evening at home, anyhow, although it was not quite the type of excitement which Sexton Blake's restless young assistant craved.

Mrs. Bardell sniffed with an aggrieved air when, a little later, she went up to find Blake and Tinker in evening attire. Her somewhat inflamed face revealed that she had not yet recovered her outraged temper.

"We are dining out, Mrs. Bardell," said Sexton Blake. "At Wierdale Court, in Surrey."

"Then all as I can say is, it's a sin and a shame!" declared the indignant landlady. "I've got in the loveliest leg o' lamb as never was, and new pertaties, too!"

A louder sniff. "To say nothink about neglecting of the detective work, which things is so slack as we'll soon be on the parish, and me never being so before, Bardell always bein' proud, if poor."

"Noble Bardell!" murmured Tinker.

Mrs. Bardell cast a war-like eye upon that young gentleman's evening dress.

"An' to say nothink, neither," said she, "about a young jakernapes getting a size larger in heads by going to swell affairs all dressed up like a butler or a waiter! It's most disintegratin', what things is comin' to. In my young days little boys didn't swank about in hevening clothes—only a nightgown, when they was cheeky, and spanked before being puttin' to bed!"

"Toodle-oo, dear old thing!" chuckled Tinker, as he followed Blake to the car, which had arrived. "If it isn't any better when we get home you shall see a doctor! Toodle-oo!"

As they were threading through the traffic of Oxford Street, Blake at the wheel of the famous car, the detective gave Tinker some further particulars of their host.

"Until recently Sir John was one of the most prominent men in the Indian Civil Service," Blake said. "Retired three years ago, and was knighted for excellent administrative work in the Madras district. A fine old fellow of the old school, irascible, good-hearted, but with the deep prejudice of his class. His son Jim six weeks ago became engaged to Miss Lillah Hartley, one of the most charming debutantes of the season, and the dinner to-night is obviously to celebrate that event."

"Jove, guv'nor! He's a lucky dog, then! I saw her portrait in an illustrated paper some days ago. She's a stunner!"

Sexton Blake smiled.

"Lack of ability to express yourself in orthodox English is one of your failings, Tinker," he

said reprovingly. "But you are right, my boy. Miss Lillah Hartley is a stunner—I mean she is exceedingly beautiful. She is the daughter of Lady Hartley, one of the most popular women in English society."

"A merry widow, isn't she?" said Tinker.

"Her ladyship is widowed, yes. Her late husband, Sir Edward Hartley, who came into the baronetcy and family estate in Surrey ten years ago, was killed two seasons back by a motor-car accident. Young Currier gave me these particulars when I met him in connection with the Bothwell case."

Blake presently halted at a jeweller's, where they purchased a fitting present for the betrothed pair; then they were soon speeding southwards. Less than an hour's driving brought the Grey Panther to the poplar-flanked drive of Sir John Currier's residence, which lay half hidden in a well-timbered park.

A mechanic took charge of the car, and Sir John, who had observed their arrival from the house, came forward to meet them.

He was a red-faced man of sixty, with stubborn chin and hard features, relieved by twinkling blue eyes. His left foot was encased in a much-slashed slipper as a concession to his prevailing malady—gout—and as he walked he leaned slightly on a stout stick.

"Good of you to come, Blake," he boomed, shaking the detective's hand. "Sorry I didn't give more warning. Shockin' memory, y'know. Tinker, I suppose? How-de-do, young fellow? Jim will be so glad to meet you again, Blake. Says you made him on that Bothwell case. Lucky dog—what?"

He chuckled. "Wait till you meet his girl!"

Leading them into the hall, Sir John rattled his stick forcibly against the oak settle as a twinge of gout took him.

"Jackson, you black rascal! Where are you?" he roared. "Jackson!"

"Comin', sah!"

"Oh, there you are! Worst of these confounded niggers, Blake. You can't see 'em in the gloom!"

A huge African negro came forward, showing the whites of his eyes and a set of perfect teeth in a grin. Keeping well out of range of the stick, Jackson took their luggage and coats from the guests, and, with a grunt, the irascible Sir John led them into the drawing-room.

Lady Hartley, the mother of the bride-to-be, who was acting as hostess, came forward to greet them cordially. Little more than forty, Blake thought her a woman of striking and peculiar beauty, though to the detective's keen eyes her features had a slightly foreign cast. But in her low and musical voice there was no trace of accent as she greeted them.

"I am truly glad to meet you, Mr. Blake," her ladyship said. "We have heard so much of you from Jim—and of Mr. Tinker, too!"

The charming smile she bestowed on Tinker quite won that young man's heart.

A moment later, as they were being introduced to Lillah Hartley, Blake found himself bowing to one of the loveliest girls he had ever met.

Tall and supple, with her mother's large, tender brown eyes, and a wealth of tawny hair, thickly coiled about her shapely head, Jim Currier's beautiful fiancée wore an evening-gown, the well-chosen tone of which softened in effect the warm olive tint of her skin. Again that puzzled look crept into his keen eyes, and Blake glanced quickly towards Lady Hartley, who was chatting to Tinker.

Then, with a rare but slightly puzzled smile in them, his grey eyes came back to the girl.

"Allow me to congratulate you, Miss Hartley," he said. "I am delighted to be present at what must be a happy day for you and Jim."

"Thank you, Mr. Blake." Lillah smiled at the famous detective. "It was good of you to come. Jim wished it very much. I must confess that I, too, was curious to meet Englaud's most famous criminal-hunter."

"I trust that he comes up to your expectations," Blake said, with a laugh.

"Perhaps not quite!" She echoed his laugh. "I half expected to meet a bullet-headed person, wearing a miniature handcuff as a tiepin, and with a bundle of warrants protruding from his pockets."

"Dear me!" said Blake, joining in the laughter. "If young ladies form such horrible impressions of my calling, I shall be losing my assistant. Tinker is very susceptible to the opinions of the fair sex, and I shall be having him give me notice."

At this juncture Jim Currier came up. He was a tall, athletic young man, with his father's twinkling blue eyes and firmness of chin.

"Hallo, Blake! Jolly glad to see you," he said, with a hearty grip. "You'll stay a few days, of course, old man? I can promise you a run with the trout and some golf."

"Thanks, Jim!" answered Sexton Blake. "Unless some urgent matter recalls me to town, I shall be delighted."

The grinning Jackson announced dinner, and the guests, mostly local people, filed into the dining-room.

Wierdale Court was one of the show places of the county, and the dining-room was panelled in rich old mahogany—a costly whim of a former Currier. The flames of the log fire racing up the wide chimney were reflected in ruby gleams upon its tawny surface, throwing into relief the white damask, the flowers, and the silver on the table.

The dinner passed amid gay chatter, chiefly relating to sport and local affairs. When the toasting glasses had been filled Sir John rose to his feet.

"It gives me great pleasure, ladies and gentlemen, to publicly announce the engagement of my son Jim to Miss Lillah Hartley," he said. "You are all friends of my family, and of Lady Hartley, who so charmingly fills the position of hostess in an old widower's home to-night, and I know you will join me in every good wish for the long life and happiness of my only son and his future charming bride."

After admiring the rich colour of the old port, and with one doubtful, downwards glance

at his gouty foot, Sir John drained his glass with the air of a man performing a duty at the expense of his constitution, and bowed gallantly to Lady Hartley.

There were other speeches, including one from Sexton Blake, and after Jim had responded Lady Hartley rose to her feet. Opening a jewel-case that lay on the table before her, she took out a magnificent ruby, set in the form of a pendant.

A hum of admiration came from the guests, and even Sexton Blake, indifferent as a rule to what he termed a "bauble," could not repress an exclamation of surprise as he noted the stone's size and seemingly living rays of blood-red fire.

"My betrothal gift to Lillah," her ladyship said quietly, as she fastened the glittering jewel around the girl's neck. "It came into my possession on the happiest day of my life. I trust it will prove as faithful a talisman of happiness to her as it has always been to me."

"Hear, hear!" said Sir John. "Good luck and long happiness to you, Lillah, my dear. It's George, it's a beauty! I've lived for years in India, the home of great jewels, but I've never seen a grander ruby than that."

Humbler gifts were given to the radiantly happy lovers, and then dessert was served.

Lady Hartley's magnificent gift turned the topic of conversation to famous rubies.

"Talking of fine rubies always reminds me," said Sir John, "of the stir in native circles in India some twenty years ago, when the great Kali ruby was stolen from one of the Hindoo temples. It formed the eye of the goddess Kali, and one morning the old priest was found stabbed on the steps of the shrine. The ruby had been wrenched from its setting in the centre of the idol's forehead, and every search made for it was made in vain. The Customs authorities had orders to prevent all rubies of large size leaving the country, but nothing further was heard about the idol's missing eye; and many believe it still to be in the country. The best place for it, too!" he ended grimly. "The trail of these great Hindoo jewels are only too often flecked with blood. Good job this is not one of them—though it's splendid enough to be one of those dangerous religious stones."

As the old baronet finished his narrative, Sexton Blake's keen ears caught the sound of a sharply indrawn breath. He looked quickly towards Lady Hartley. With pale face and tremulous lips she was staring with fascinated eyes at the huge ruby that was now pulsating with blood-red, sinister fire upon her daughter's neck. Again that puzzled look crept into the detective's eyes. He read fear in her ladyship's face.

During the rest of the evening Lady Hartley seemed preoccupied and contributed but little to the lively conversation. At midnight when the guests, excepting Blake and Tinker, had departed, she breathed a faint sigh of relief. Jim Currier fondly kissed his fiancée good-night and escorted Lillah and her mother to their car.

The drive home was a short one. Lady Hart-

ley and her daughter entered a fine old Tudor mansion, ivy-clustered and picturesque, that adjoined the Wierdale Court estate, and a trim maid came forward and helped them with their cloaks.

"A letter was handed to one of the kitchen-maids, addressed to you, my lady," the girl said. "I have placed it on the table in the library."

"Thank you, Morris. You may go to bed now. I shall not require anything. Good-night!"

As the maid went to the servants' quarters, Lillah turned to her mother.

"Will you excuse me, mother? I feel tired, and would like to go straight to bed. I don't know how to thank you for your present. It's simply splendid! Why, I didn't know you had such a splendid stone! I have never seen it before!"

At the mention of the ruby her mother's eyes became troubled.

"I have had it for many years, Lillah," she said thoughtfully. "It was given to me on my marriage by your grandfather—my father. But I—"

She broke off suddenly. "My grandfather!" said the girl. "I have never met him, mother—never any of your people!"

Lady Hartley's olive-tinted face slightly flushed.

"My people are not in England, Lillah—I have told you that before. But go to bed now, my dearest. I am not in the mood for questions to-night."

Zenda held Lillah in her arms and kissed her fondly. She had hidden, for her daughter's sake, her own Parsee origin. She had feared prejudice against her half-caste daughter in her husband's country, and Edward Hartley had helped his wife to guard that secret of the past, for Lillah's sake.

Not a soul in England, save Zenda herself, knew that beautiful Lillah was a Eurasian!

"You do not look happy to-night, mother dear!" Lillah said, with an anxious glance at Lady Hartley's troubled face. "And—and it should be such a happy night for us both!"

"Don't worry, my dear," her mother answered. And the sadness in her voice came

painfully to the girl's ears. "I am only tired. Go to bed now, Lillah, I shall not be long. Good-night, my darling."

Lillah, her beautiful eyes glowing with affection and happiness, kissed her mother and went up the stairs to her room. Lady Hartley's soft, golden-brown eyes lit up with a wealth of tenderness as she watched her go. Since the tragic death of Sir Edward Hartley she had lavished all her love on the beautiful girl who had brought so much happiness to them both. It had been for Lillah's sake that Zenda and Hartley, three years' after their arrival in England, had broken the vows made in the Parsee Temple of Ormuzd and become of the English Church.

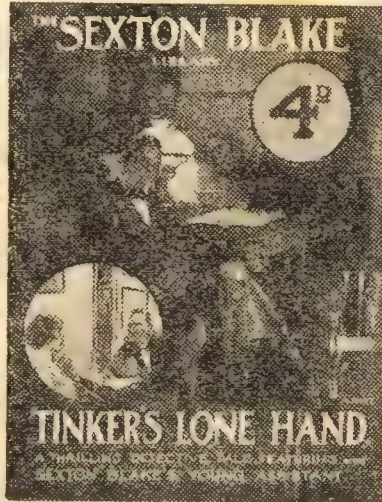
When Lillah had gone from sight she turned and went to the library. She sank wearily into a chair and her eyes sought the portrait of her husband that stood upon the desk before her. Raising it, she pressed it to her quivering lips; but he whom she had so loved and revered, he in whom her very life had been bound up, was now dead and unable to comfort her.

"A mad marriage, perhaps," she murmured. "But, oh, my husband, to go with you through that madness again! And yet—my child! If they knew all, they would scorn her—call her of 'nigger' blood! Oh, God of my dear husband, in whom I now believe, help me to guard my darling's secret to the end!"

The reckless, laughing eyes and handsome face so vividly portrayed opened the floodgates of memory, and her mind raced back across the past. She saw once more the clamorous Indian liner. Her Parsee father's parting words came back with a new significance:

"Guard this ruby as a secret, since it has itself a secret that may well make its ruby-redness be as a blood-drop from a faithless heart."

Her eyes fell on the letter which the maid had placed for her on the library table. With a swift movement she went to the table, opened the letter and read it. Her face became pale with apprehension. Three days before she had received just as mysterious a letter in the same hand. But then she had not known!



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"What can it mean?" she muttered uneasily. The letter ran thus:

"Lady Hartley will meet the writer to-night at the drive end at sunset, and must observe secrecy as to this appointment. She must yield up what is demanded of her, otherwise she must be prepared to have her past revealed to the world.—B. S."

She crushed the letter nervously in her hand, an uneasy thought that it might be connected with the ruby obsessed her mind and terrified her. She had not suspected this until she heard Sir John's story to-night.

Could the stone she had given to her daughter to-night be the missing "eye" of the goddess Kali?

There was reason for Lady Hartley's fear, for, being of the East, she knew its fanatical reverence for the stolen ruby that for countless ages had adorned the brow of Kali—chief goddess of the Hindoos—with ten million worshippers at her shrine. She knew of the terrible vendetta that had been sworn by the high priests and of the vengeance, swift and sure, that would follow in the wake of the possessor. To those of the Kali caste the ruby was more precious than life itself.

"B. S.," she whispered. "Who can it be? Not—not Bhur Singh!"

Suddenly she sat tense and rigid. Someone was watching her. She felt sure of it—felt fierce, invisible eyes upon her. The knowledge bore upon her consciousness until she thought she must scream to break the silence and the spell of those watching, unseen eyes. She turned to the window; then, with a little cry, paused, her hand pressed to her heart, her breathing suspended.

A brown face was pressed against the glass! There came a click as the catch was forced, the half-closed curtains parted, and a man stepped into the room.

CHAPTER 2

A Mysterious Crime—Lady Hartley's Silence—The Ruby Disappears.

"TINKER!" Sexton Blake was vigorously shaking his young assistant by the arm.

"Wake up, my boy! Look alive!"

"Warrior-marrer?" murmured the sleeper. "Warrior—Oh! Great pip! Is that you, guv'nor?" Tinker was awake instantly. "Anything wrong?"

In the bright light of early morning he saw that Blake's expression was grave than usual and that his lips were tightly compressed. Clad in his dressing-gown, unshaven, and with ruffled hair, it was obvious that the detective had only recently left his bed, he and Tinker having been accommodated with adjoining rooms at Wierdale Court.

"Be quick into your clothes, Tinker!" Blake said hurriedly. "Something has happened at the Larches. That's the residence of Lady Hartley and her daughter, you know. Miss

Hartley has just 'phoned through to Jim and wants him to get there quickly, accompanied by myself and you. She seems in a pretty bad way about it, my boy. As soon as you're dressed, get the car ready, and we'll slip off. Sir John is not yet risen, and we don't want to worry him before we know what's wrong."

Blake hurried from the room. Tinker, his mind in a whirl, sprang out of bed and after hastily dressing himself, ran down to the garage. Starting the car, he brought it round to the front steps, where Blake and Jim Currier were already waiting. The young man had hurriedly donned a sports coat and grey flannel trousers. He was unshaven and very pale.

"By heavens! This is awful Blake! What can it mean?" Jim said huskily. "Lillah, on the 'phone, said it was something 'dreadful'! She was in a terrible way about it. I wonder —"

"It is a waste of time to conjecture," answered Blake crisply. "Get in the car, Tinker. You had better sit beside me, Currier, and direct me. And don't get uneasy, old chap; it may be nothing very bad, after all."

"You don't know Lillah, Blake. She doesn't get hysterical about nothing," groaned Jim. "And she was just wild with terror—"

The powerful car swept through the lodge gates, and soon after they had raced through the old-world little town of Weirdale they reached the Larches.

A trembling, white-faced manservant met them at the door, and Jim clutched the man's arm in his agitation.

"Where are Lady Hartley and Miss Lillah, Jenkins? What has happened?"

"Her ladyship is in the morning-room sir," the man said shakily. "Dr. Long and Inspector Mulberry, of the local police, are with them. It's terrible—terrible, sir!"

"The police?" gasped Jim. "Why, what —"

"Yes, sir; there's been murder," said Jenkins, in a trembling voice. "Or what looks like murder, for the doctor says the wound couldn't have been self-inflicted. And her ladyship was found by the nigger —"

"Pull yourself together, my man, and don't ramble," Blake said sharply. "Tell us just what has happened. When was this discovered, and, by whom?"

"One of the maids, sir, rose at the usual time and went into the library to tidy up. She thought her ladyship in bed, but was amazed to see her lying on the floor, unconscious. She thought she'd just fainted, but as she bent over her, trying to revive her, she saw something else, and jumped up with a scream. It was the body of a black man, lying alongside her ladyship—stone dead, and with a dagger sticking in his neck!"

"Good heavens!" gasped Currier.

"The girl hadn't noticed the man before, sir," went on Jenkins agitatedly. "It was not yet full light, and, the man being black, she hadn't noticed. It gave her a fair shock, and

she runs, screaming, into the hall. I went there and saw—saw—” He broke off with a shudder. “I phoned through for the police and the doctor. That’s all I know.”

“You had better go in to them, Jim,” Blake said quietly. “Tinker and I will have a look at the library at once. The body has not been removed, I suppose, Jenkins?”

The old man wrung his hands.

“No, sir,” Inspector Mulberry said nothing was to be disturbed. He’s with Miss Lillah, questioning her, now. I don’t know if I’m doing right by taking you to the library, sir, as Inspector Mulberry said—”

“I am a detective, Jenkins—Sexton Blake. I have Miss Hartley’s authority to appear in this case. You may be sure I shall not abuse any privileges or interfere in any way with the authority and investigations of the police. A black man, you say?”

“Yes, sir—leastways, coloured.”

As Jim hurried off to see Lillah, Jenkins conducted Blake and Tinker to the scene of the tragedy.

The library was a large, well-furnished room, and along the panelled walls ran well-stocked bookcases. Opening out upon a veranda was a wide French window, and near this lay the huddled figure of a man of colour. The morning sun, streaming in through the window, caused something to sparkle and glitter on the dark neck.

Blake crossed swiftly towards the stark figure, and, dropping to one knee, made a careful examination.

The glittering object proved to be the jewelled hilt of a toyish and elaborately chased dagger, the slender blade of which was buried deeply. The detective examined it closely, but did not remove it. Blake always respected the primary authority of the official police.

Next he peered closely into the dusky face. Sexton Blake never, even when out on pleasure bent, travelled without certain small instruments which his methods and his professional experiences had many times proved invaluable. He took out his powerful magnifying-glass and, after polishing the lens on his handkerchief, closely scrutinised the man’s forehead, on which some slightly abnormal appearance had riveted his attention. Then he turned to Tinker.

“Here, my boy,” he said quickly. “Take a peep through the glass at the centre of his forehead. That’s right—just there. What do you make of it?”

“Why, guv’nor, there’s a patch of skin, in the exact centre, lighter in colour than the surrounding skin. It’s cracked and peeling a little, too,” answered Tinker.

“Exactly, my boy. And if you will look closer, you will see, embedded in the pore, or that small spot, some minute specks of what appears to be red pigment. The man belongs to one of the Hindoo castes, I feel sure. They wear, sometimes, a tatooed—sometimes a painted—mark on their brows, in order that their different castes may be distinguished. The mark in this case, I should say, has been painted

regularly for years, as witness the skin’s comparative lightness of colour. The last time this caste-mark was made, judging by the fact that some of the pigment still remains, was as recent as a month or five weeks ago, I feel sure, giving us the valuable hint that the man has not long left his own country.”

“I believe you’re right, guv’nor,” Tinker said. “Anything else? That looks a curious dagger!”

“I believe it to be of Indian workmanship,” Blake said. “And whoever stabbed him used considerable violence. The blade has pierced the neck from behind, and severed the jugular vein. At a rough guess, I should say that he has been dead about six hours.”

“Who do you think the chap can be, guv’nor?”

Tinker was looking down, with mingled compassion and curiosity, at the dead face its strong features rigid in the set of the death agony.

Sexton Blake looked up from a close scrutiny of the hands.

“In his own country he is probably a man of some position, for his clothes are good also his linen, which is void of any marks. You will notice that the tailor’s tab has also been removed from the coat. I have examined his finger-nails, but there is no trace of his having clutched at anyone. They are unbroken and hold no shreds of cloth. The contents of the finger-nails have before now afforded me a valuable clue in a murder case. I think that we may deduce that he was taken unawares. The furniture is not disarranged, as you see. The strongest suggestion that there was no struggle lies in the fact that he was stabbed from behind.”

“Have you noticed how clumsy his tie is knotted, guv’nor?” asked Tinker. “Seems to have been grabbed hold of, too!”

“Yes; I was coming to that. It is far from being the orthodox knot, and gives an impression that he was unfamiliar with European dress. That was quite a smart point of yours, my boy. It bears out my opinion that he has not long left his native country, in spite of his well-groomed appearance, and Western fashionable attire.”

Heavy footsteps sounded along the passage and soon the door opened, to admit a burly, red-faced man, blue-serged, and bearing the ineffaceable stamp of the police. His red face showed a tendency to turn purple as he saw Blake and Tinker.

“Hullo! What the dickens are you doing here?” he said gruffly. “I gave orders that no one was to come near. You’ll be for the high-jumps if you’ve touched anything! What are you—newspaper men?”

“Good-morning!” Blake said calmly. “You are Inspector Mulberry, I presume?”

“And who the dickens might you be?” snapped the police-officer, with a glare.

“My name is Sexton Blake,” said the detective, with a quiet smile. He opened his jacket, and exposed a silver badge. “You will see I carry an authoritative badge as acting—

through Detective-inspector Rollings—for Scotland Yard. I have also the additional authority to investigate conferred upon me by Miss Hartley."

Inspector Mulberry grunted, but at the mention of Scotland Yard his manner became a little more mollified. But this was the biggest case his placid career as a country police-officer had yet offered, and he did not take the intrusion with any pleasure.

"H'm! I suppose your presence will be all right, then. You won't find a fat lot to interest you here, Mister Blake. The case is pretty clear. Her ladyship is coming round now, so I shall soon get a statement. Not much doubt as to who killed this poor chap, I'm afraid."

"Meaning?" inquired Blake, with a barely perceptible lift of his eyebrows.

"Meaning that everything looks thundering black against her ladyship," Mulberry said bluntly. "I questioned the servants, and found out that the dagger belongs to her, and is used as a paper-knife. This nigger evidently came here late last night to see her, and they quarrelled. She was lying on the floor—just there, by those chalk-marks—when I was called on the scene, and clutched in her hand I found several shreds of silk that match the nigger's tie in colour and texture. All I've to do is to find out why he came, and why they fell out."

"Indeed?" said Blake quietly. "All you lack, then, is the motive?"

"And when I've got her statement, you see, I shall jolly soon have that!"

Tinker eyed his master with undisguised consternation, but, except for a quick gleam that shot into Blake's eyes, his face was impassive.

"What of the man's pockets?" Sexton Blake inquired. "They are now empty, so I presume you have taken charge of the contents. Is there anything which may serve to identify him?"

"Nothing at all," Mulberry said. "Except for a gold watch and a good sum in paper money, they contained nothing of importance."

Blake's grey eyes became interested.

"A gold watch?" he repeated quickly. "Have you any objection to my examining it? An expensive watch generally carries the maker's name and its guarantee number. It may be possible to trace the man's identity from that."

Mulberry grinned triumphantly.

"You'll draw a blank, I'm afraid, Mister Blake. It's gold right enough, but it doesn't carry any maker's name—not even the hall-mark," said the inspector, with a thinly veiled sneer. "I've heard of your wonderful methods! Perhaps you'll tell me what you 'deduce' from that?"

"Certainly, Mulberry," said the great criminologist cheerfully. "The absence of a sign may be a more important clue than its presence. If there is no hall-mark, it helps to prove my theory that the man is a native of India."

Inspector Mulberry stared at him a little blankly, and scratched his close-cropped head.

"In India, inspector," Blake said quietly. "It is possible to purchase articles of gold cheaper

than in this country. The gold is mined in the northern districts, and much of it does not come to England to be stamped with the British hall-mark guarantee. A heavy tax is therefore evaded."

Mulberry walked to the table on which the watch and money was placed.

"I think you will find I am correct, Mulberry," Blake said, as he joined the inspector, and took up the watch.

"Oh, I dare say!" grunted Mulberry. "Not of much importance, anyway. I knew he was a nigger of some sort. I've sent particulars to the Yard, so I expect the photographers down soon. I'm going to her ladyship now, so I'll lock the door. There'll be the dickens of a row if anything's touched!"

Blake was silent as they proceeded to the morning-room. As the inspector had said, things were beginning to look black against Lady Hartley, although the evidence was circumstantial and motive was so far lacking. That she should have been discovered alone and unconscious with the man who had been killed by her own jewelled paper-knife was disconcerting, to say the least.

With ashen face Lady Hartley, who, it was plain to see, had only recently recovered consciousness, looked fearfully at the hard-featured official as they entered. Jim and Lillah stood beside the couch on which she lay, and were trying to calm her agitation.

Mulberry strutted towards her, and wetting the point of a pencil, jerked out a well-thumbed notebook.

"Sorry to trouble your ladyship," he said brusquely. "But it's my duty to take a statement from you, so I'll be obliged if you'll tell me exactly what happened in the library early this morning."

Lady Hartley's golden-brown eyes filled with terror.

"I know nothing—nothing!" she cried wildly. "Oh, please do not question me. It is like an evil dream. I can't tell you—anything."

There was deliberate evasion in her words, and Mulberry eyed her narrowly. Didn't look quite English—though deuced good-looking. May have had some past connection with this dead "nigger." Well, he was going to find it out. She couldn't fool him!

"Don't you see how awkward things are looking, your ladyship?" he said bluntly. "Who is this nigger fellow, and what was he doing here last night? I must impress upon your ladyship the necessity of answering the questions of the police."

"I—I can tell you so very little. I do not know this man," she replied, with fear-stricken, averted eyes. "How he was—was murdered I cannot say. He entered the library late last night by way of the French windows, and I faintly, I knew no more until I found Doctor Long hanging over me a few minutes ago."

Disbelief was plainly written on the inspector's harsh features.

"Are you aware, your ladyship, that I found several shreds of the dead man's necktie clutched

in your hand?" he said sharply. "Also that the dagger which caused his death belongs to you—your paper-knife, in fact! It's impossible that the wound was self-inflicted. You say this man entered last night. It is quite obvious, then, that you were present when he died, as you were found beside him this morning! If only to clear yourself, your ladyship must tell the exact truth. Who is this man, and for what purpose did he come here?"

The cold denunciation in his voice broke down the last barrier of Lady Hartley's endurance, and she clung tearfully to Lillah, who sought to comfort her.

"Lady Hartley," said Blake quietly, though he was blazing at Mulberry's brutality, "you are not compelled to make any statement to this man. What you have to say I advise you to withhold until the inquest. Inspector Mulberry is grossly exceeding his duty!"

"Thank you, Mr. Blake—I will take your advice," Lady Hartley said.

Mulberry closed his book with a vicious snap and turned to the doctor, after a fierce glare at Blake.

"I'd like you to step along to the library, doctor," he said. "I must find out the correct time the man met his death."

To the relief of everyone present they left the room, and Blake turned to her ladyship.

"You will be wise to go to your room, Lady Hartley. No useful purpose will be served by your presence, and you are plainly unfit to be worried," he said, and the quiet sympathy in his voice brought a look of gratitude into the dark, tear-brimmed eyes.

"I will, Mr. Blake. But, oh, please do not let them question me further. I cannot tell them more, and it would be useless," she said tremulously. "I—I will wait until the inquest. And you will help me, won't you, Mr. Blake? You won't let them say that terrible thing was done by me?"

"I will do my best, Lady Hartley," Blake said gently, and leaning heavily on Lillah's arm, her ladyship left the room.

Jim Currier turned to the detective, his face flushed with anger.

"Mulberry's a fool!" he said savagely. "You don't believe her guilty, do you Blake? He's forging a chain of evidence against her that, although circumstantial, is going to prove damning if we are not careful. Take up the case, and prove her innocent. She's no more guilty than I am, man. Why—she couldn't do it!"

But Blake's lips were compressed. He had not liked Lady Hartley's strange reticence.

"Rest assured that I shall do my best, Jim," he said. "Although her reluctance to tell all she knows is strange, I am loth to think her guilty." He turned to Tinker. "Ask one of the maids if Miss Hartley has finished attending her mother. I should like to see her for a minute. It is just possible that she may be able to help us!"

Tinker hurried off. Blake dropped into a chair. There was a vein of mystery in the

case that appealed to him. That Lady Hartley was no stranger to the dead man was apparent. She was, for some reason, afraid to divulge what she knew concerning his identity, his object in coming to the house, and his death. That would be accounted for were she guilty. But Blake did not believe she was guilty.

Why, then, was she afraid to reveal the truth?

A few moments later Tinker returned, followed by Lillah. Jim crossed over to her, and for some moments she clung to him, overcome by her grief and anxiety.

"You must be brave, darling," Jim said gently. "Mr. Blake has promised to take up the case, and will strive to prove your mother's innocence."

Lillah's eyes filled with gratitude as she turned to the detective.

"Thank you!" she said, with emotion. "It is impossible that my mother should have done this! She is so kind—so gentle. All my life I have never heard her utter one harsh word. And—and to think that hateful policeman should be talking of his 'evidence' against her! It's not true, Mr. Blake—it can't be true!"

"Mulberry's an ass! He sees no further than his nose!" Tinker said indignantly.

"Have you any knowledge of the affair, Miss Hartley?" Blake asked gently. "Can you help us in any way?"

"I know nothing, except that my mother came into my room about one o'clock this morning, and asked for the ruby that she gave me last evening—at the dinner—that splendid ruby, Mr. Blake. She seemed very pale and excited, but when I asked if she was unwell she said no. I gave the ruby to her without question, and, being tired after the party, went straight off to sleep again."

A light of interest flickered in the detective's eyes.

"Do you know where the ruby is now?" he asked quickly.

"No. It is very strange, but when I asked my mother about it a few minutes ago, thinking the dead man had tried to steal it, she told me not to worry, as she had lost it, and that she would give me some other present," Lillah said.

Blake was deep in thought for a few minutes; then he looked at the girl with a kindly, reassuring smile.

"I will not question you further," he said. "Go back to your mother, and try to comfort her. It is possible that what you have told me will help my investigations—at any rate, it provides a loose thread to the tangle."

"You have made me much happier, Mr. Blake. I know my mother is innocent, in spite of her refusal to speak, and I thank you from the bottom of my heart!" Lillah said, in low tones of gratitude, and she left the room, followed by Jim.

"Come, Tinker!" Blake said. "We will search the library for any trace of the ruby. I've an idea that, in some way or other, it is connected with the crime. It is strange that

Lady Hartley should have asked for the return of the stone, and now refuse to say what has become of it, except the vague statement that it is lost. Looking through the window a few moments ago, I saw Mulberry and the doctor walking in the grounds, so we shall be safe from interruption."

Deftly picking the lock, they entered the library, but although they searched systematically they were forced to admit themselves beaten. No trace of the ruby could be found.

"It's beginning to beat me, Tinker!" Sexton Blake said at last. "We are up against one of the most baffling cases of our career. Did this man come after the ruby? Was that why her ladyship got it back from her daughter?"

"Looks like it, guv'nor," Tinker said. "But if she got it from Miss Lillah to give to the Hindoo chap, where is it now?"

"That," said Blake, "is the interesting point. Assuming that this man came after the ruby, why did Lady Hartley fetch it for him without rousing the house? If she gave it to him, then killed him, the ruby should have been found in this room, or in the possession of either her ladyship or the dead man. It is quite clear that it has vanished, and until we have solved the mystery of its disappearance we are at a loose end. Let us get some breakfast, my boy. Afterwards we will search the grounds."

CHAPTER 3.

The Clue of the Spreading Toes—On the Trail—A Thrilling Discovery—Tinker Finds a Fight—The End of the Hunt.

"HELLO! There goes the giddy old Mulberry, guv'nor! He's looking jolly pleased with himself, too!"

Sexton Blake and Tinker had just emerged from the morning-room, where a hearty breakfast had been served by the startled and horrified servants to them and Jim Currier. Lillah Hartley was still with her mother in her ladyship's room. The private detectives were just in time to see Inspector Mulberry, in company with the doctor, disappearing down the drive towards the gate, and the expression of that official had excited Tinker's remark.

Sexton Blake looked after the retreating figures with a grave expression in his eyes. At breakfast the three had excitedly discussed the tragedy, and Jim had returned home to inform Sir John of what had occurred.

"I have an impression that our friend the inspector is withholding a trump card until the inquest," Blake said quietly. "He seemed very sure of his ground when questioning Lady Hartley in that confident and bullying tone. It is possible that he has knowledge of an acquaintance between her ladyship and the murdered man, and has conjectured a motive on those grounds. I am bound to say it looks very bad, my boy."

Tinker looked glum. If Lady Hartley was guilty it was Sexton Blake's duty to bring that

guilt home to her. But in spite of appearances the boy could not believe in her guilt.

"We shall have to buck up, then, guv'nor. It's a beastly shame if her ladyship is to be arrested, and is innocent—the scandal for her daughter, and young Mr. Currier, too. We don't know much about her, but I feel jolly sure she wouldn't hurt a fly, let alone commit murder."

Blake had made his way to the outside of the French windows of the library.

"The disappearance of the ruby, Tinker," said he, "gives me an impression that there was probably a third party on the scene, and we will conduct our search from that point of view. First, we will start on the flower border, which, to the width of four feet, divides the French window from the path. The supposed third person would have had to cross that border to gain entry into the room by the window, and so have trod upon the soft earth. In that case there should be his or her footprints in addition to those of the murdered man."

Sexton Blake and his young assistant carefully scrutinised the soft earth. As they expected, footprints were fairly plentiful. The man who had entered the room could not have helped but leave traces of his presence in the soil of the border between the window and the gravel path. Blake knew that these footprints—those made by the dead man—would have been examined by Inspector Mulberry, but Blake, who always looked beyond the obvious, was out for bigger game.

"Tinker, come here," Blake called, and there was subdued excitement in his voice. "I think we are on the right supposition. What do you make of this? I was hoping to find something that Mulberry had failed to notice, and I feel tolerably sure that he never saw this."

As Tinker reached his side Blake pointed to the imprint of a naked foot that was faintly formed in the soft earth, just one scarcely perceptible imprint across those that had been obviously made by the boots of the murdered man.

"My hat, guv'nor! Looks as if you're right," Tinker said excitedly. "It was made during the night, too. The surrounding earth is light in colour, and dry with yesterday's hot sun, but the imprint itself is dark and damp. The foot that left that trail displaced the dry surface, revealing the moist earth beneath."

"Quite right, young 'un," Blake said approvingly. "What else do you notice?"

It was the criminologist's method of training his young assistant to question him thus, and Tinker examined the footprint closer.

"There is an unusual space between the big toe and the second toe, guv'nor," he said. "They lie closer together in the average foot than in this one."

"Exactly," Blake agreed. "The toes of civilised men and women lie close owing to the wearing of boots. The point you have noticed, my boy, suggests that the owner of that naked foot and spreading toes was not a wearer of boots!"

"And what do those two half-circles mean inside the big and second toe? They look as if they have been scalloped out of the flesh, for if the two toes were pressed together a complete circle would be formed!" Tinker said.

But Sexton Blake had himself been peering at that curious indentation, visible only to the keenest of trained eyes, in that faint imprint of a naked foot which had trod over the marks made by the smart, European boots of the dead Hindoo.

"I think we shall be able to deduce the nationality of the owner of the foot from that," Blake said slowly. "Also his position in life!"

"How— What? Jove, guv'nor! You take the blinkin' biscuit!" Tinker said, eyeing his master in amazement. "Mean to say you can tell whether he's a punkah-wallah or a giddy rajah when he's at home?"

A quiet smile played about the criminologist's firm lips.

"Don't look so startled, young 'un!" he said. "The deduction is quite simple. This man, like the one who now lies dead, is apparently a Hindoo. Those two half-circles have been formed by the continuous wearing of wooden sandals of a certain type. The pattern I refer to is much worn in India by the lower castes, on account of its cheapness. It consists of a combined sole and heel, constructed of hard wood, and, in order that it may be retained upon the foot, a knob is made on the forepart of the sole, and the big and second toes are divided by it. The toes grip this knob, thus in time forming the half-circles on the inner sides on the toes. Sounds difficult to wear, I know, but those who are used to it find it comfortable, although primitive."

Tinker grinned.

"You gave me a bit of a shock at first, guv'nor; but I was slow not to have thought of it myself. Those sandals are worn by the thousand out there. But—"

He broke off suddenly, and a look of disappointment crept into his alert young face.

"But what?" inquired Blake.

"There may be a flaw in the theory, guv'nor. The dead Hindoo may have approached the window first in his boots, then have taken them off before entering to accost Lady Hartley."

"You mean, my boy, that the dead man may have made all these footprints. I have thought of that," Blake said. "But he would not also have removed his socks. However, we will go to the library, and examine the dead man's feet. If they tally with this imprint, possibly we may be on a false trail; but, somehow I don't think they will."

"How is that, sir?" asked Tinker.

"Because the dead man was apparently of high position," Blake said. "The owner of this foot, on the other hand, is of humble circumstances, judging by the quality of his usual footwear. These sandals can be bought in the native bazaars for a rupee."

"I follow, guv'nor—sort of, one shops in Bond Street, the other, Petticoat Lane!"

They entered by way of the French window, which was open.

"Let me see. The imprint was that of a right foot," said Blake, and, overcoming his repugnance, he knelt beside the rigid figure.

After a slight difficulty, he succeeded in removing the Hindoo's boot and sock.

"We are on the right track, my boy. That imprint was undoubtedly made by a third person," Blake said, with a quiet note of satisfaction in his voice. "This foot, you see, is perfectly normal."

Tinker examined the brown foot closely.

"I see, guv'nor, so far as the toes go. But what are those calluses on the toes and about the ankles?" he asked.

"They were made by a different and more expensive type of sandal," Blake answered. "One of soft leather, in fact, containing thin loops, through which the toes are placed, and the continuous chafing has formed the corns. There is one in exactly the same place on each toe, you will see. On the ankles they were made by a retaining strap, such as is worn with ordinary skates. We can deduce from this, young 'un, that the dead Hindoo was of higher caste than the man with the spreading toes."

Replacing the boot and sock, the detective rose to his feet. There was a light of triumph shining in the alert grey eyes, and Tinker noted it with satisfaction. His master was hot on the trail.

"That chap with the wide toes must have trod like a cat—only made the one mark. Place a flower-pot over that footprint, young 'un," Blake said briskly. "There may be a swarm of police round here soon, and we don't want the scent destroyed by their tramping on it. Then I want you to go to town in the car, and return with Pedro. There will be some work for the dog to-night. He may get upon the scent of this mysterious third person, and then I fancy that the mystery will be less complex than it is at present."

Finding a flower-pot in the gardener's shed, Tinker carefully covered the almost imperceptible imprint of the naked foot.

"Mulberry's own fault if he fails to see it, sir," he grinned. "Though he'll wonder what the bally old flower-pot's doing there!"

"We have no time for him this journey, young 'un," answered Blake. "Our methods are not those of the official police. They mostly go for the glaringly obvious, and would probably scoff at our theory. Inspector Mulberry must work on his own lines. But we must be fair to him, Tinker. We possess a distinct advantage in knowing of the missing ruby."

They walked to the car, and Tinker started up the engine.

"You needn't hurry, Tinker, for I don't intend to get Pedro on the trail until dusk, when all will be quiet. I shall make my H.Q. the Bull's Head, at Wierdale, at present. So bring Pedro there. I'll send a message to Sir John and Jim, telling them of my intentions."

"Right you are, guv'nor! I'll be back about seven, then," Tinker said, and, as he pressed his

foot on the accelerator, the Grey Panther glided swiftly towards the London Road.

Filling and lighting his briar, Sexton Blake walked slowly in the direction of Wierdale. At the Bull's Head a low-lying, whitewashed inn of the old type, he made arrangements with the red-faced landlady as to rooms. This business concluded to mutual satisfaction, he went for a brisk walk, turning over the features of the case in his mind.

Blake liked solitude when concentrating upon a case of complications. Also, he felt it unwise at present to lay himself open to questioning on the part of Sir John and Jim. Hence his decision to change over to the inn.

He returned at dusk, to find Pedro and his assistant awaiting him. The bloodhound bounded to his master with a whimper of delight.

"Good boy!" Blake said, as he patted the head of the sagacious hound. "You won't let us down, I know. Much depends upon your skill to-night, old man!"

"Not he, guv'nor!" said Tinker, with an affectionate glance at the huge dog-detective. "Pedro has scarcely ever failed us yet."

The trio made their way quietly towards the Larches, the grounds of which they entered unobserved. Approaching the flower-border, Tinker removed the pot, which he found, to his satisfaction, had not been disturbed.

"Looks as if Mulberry hasn't seen it, sir," he said. "He probably thought it unnecessary to examine the footprints again. It's just as I left it. Now for Pedro!"

Blake led the dog to the print of the naked foot. Dropping his fangs to the ground, Pedro whined softly, his nostrils vibrating, as he sniffed. He cast about for some seconds, and then, with a deep-throated bay, strained at the leash.

"He's got it, guv'nor!" Tinker cried excitedly.

"Yes. The scent is fresh and strong. for the man was barefooted," Blake answered. "Had it been an impression made by a boot, young 'un, we should probably have failed. Our friend, the third person in the case, may possibly find that his bare foot that night was his undoing."

Whimpering softly, Pedro made off across the grounds, and Blake and Tinker had all their work out to keep up with him. Soon they had left the park, and were heading across open country.

"I wonder where we are going to land?" said Tinker, after a couple of miles had been travelled.

"I don't know, my boy. This man is possibly the murderer, and, being in flight, would not be particular how far he travels, so long as a place of safety is reached. He may have made his way to some farm building for the night. The time of the crime was between twelve and one o'clock. It would have been impossible for him to have left here by train until daylight, even had he wanted to."

"Then we may get him, guv'nor!" said Tinker excitedly. "Being a Hindoo, he would

be conspicuous, and, realising it, would probably remain in hiding throughout to-day, and try to catch the London express that leaves here late to-night. A nigger would be less noticeable in the dark."

"I think the same, young 'un," Blake said. "Hullo! There's a barn ahead, and Pedro is heading straight for it! I wonder if our friend of the spreading toes has been here!"

As they reached the barn, Pedro strained at the leash, and, rearing himself against the closed door, pawed it frantically.

"Wait, boy, wait!" whispered Blake, and he pressed his ear to the stout door.

Except for the scuttling of rats in the loose straw and the eerie hoot of an owl as it whirled, with luminous eyes, overhead, all was silent.

Waving Tinker behind him, Blake lifted the heavy latch and flung open the door, his electric-torch cutting a white beam through the inky blackness of the interior.

Very quietly they edged forward into the barn, and Blake swept the light round the straw-littered building, his eyes following the ray with a quick, comprehensive glance.

"The bird has evidently flown, Tinker," he said grimly. "That is if he has been here at all. Hullo! Where's Pedro off to?"

With a deep growl, the dog-detective sprang to a heap of straw that stood upon a raised platform at the far end of the barn, and commenced to scratch madly, his fore-paws scattering the straw in all directions.

Blake called the dog away, and, directing the torch upon the straw, uttered a sharp exclamation. The white circle of light revealed a leather wallet, scratched to view by Pedro's paws. Mounting the platform, Blake picked it up.

"We seem to be dealing with an extremely careless person, Tinker. First the footprint and now this! It probably slipped from his clothing last night when he slept here, for it is obvious that the mysterious third person slept here last night. Perhaps this will help us to discover his identity," Blake examined his find. "Excellent, young 'un! This case contains two passports!"

"Great thump! We're in luck, sir! Passports! Whom are they made out to?"

Blake directed the light of his torch upon the papers.

"Bhur Singh. Nationality, Hindoo. Independent means. Travelling by s.s. Margha from Bombay to Tilbury Docks," Blake read. He examined it closer. "Bhur Singh is the man who was murdered," he added sharply. "His photograph is on the passport."

Tinker peered over his master's shoulder.

"We're getting warmer, sir. Whom is the other one made out to? He will be the man we are after, of course."

"Gunga Dass. Servant to Bhur Singh. Steerage. Bombay to Tilbury Docks," Blake read. He turned it over. "There's some writing or the back in Urdu hieroglyphics, Tinker," he said. "Fortunately, I can decipher it. It is the address of a common lodging-house in the

East India Dock Road, much frequented by coloured seamen. Take these papers, Tinker. I will get after our man. You had better stop here, in case he has dropped the ruby also. The man is quite careless enough. Follow me or to the railway-station after you have searched thoroughly, as it is a thousand to one the trail will lead there."

He handed the electric-torch and passports to Tinker.

"Seek, Pedro!" he urged softly, and, with straining leash, the bloodhound led him from the barn, with a deep bay.

Tinker commenced to systematically search the barn, whilst Sexton Blake, with the hound, went out upon the now hot trail.

"Nothing doing here," muttered Tinker. "I'd better get after the guv'nor."

Half an hour had passed, and Sexton Blake's young assistant had searched every inch of the straw-littered building, by the aid of the electric-torch. But nothing else had come to light. Gunga Dass, if he were the late occupant of the barn, had left no further trace of it.

On the point of following his master, Tinker, about to step down from the raised platform on which he had been searching, stood suddenly still. He had sensed some presence in that barn other than his own!

He sprang round instantly. The slight sound had seemed to come from behind him, further back in the deep shadows.

"Hallo! What—"

Tinker paused, fumbling to focus the torch rays.

Hiss-sh-sh!

There came a soft swish. Tinker felt something tighten round his neck that felt like a band of fire. The torch dropped from his fingers, plunging the scene into ebony darkness, and his fingers, clawing desperately at his throat, encountered a thin silk lariat that was being drawn tighter and tighter by his unseen assailant.

With a half-throttled cry the youngster staggered forward, striking out blindly with his fists. His knuckles encountered soft flesh and he dimly heard a snarl of pain, followed by a slight slackening of the noose that had threatened to strangle him.

Blindly he sprang forward, and now his arms were locked desperately round the body of the intruder. Across the barn they swayed, slithering on the precarious foothold of loose straw, each struggling fiercely for the mastery. Tinker knew that his life might depend on his overcoming the man who had so cowardly attacked him; and, half-throttled as he was, he put up a strong fight.

In that heart-thrilling moment the thought came: Was this Gunga Dass?

They were now within a yard of the edge of the straw platform that was raised a good four feet above the level of the floor proper, and a couple of seconds later they were swaying on the edge. The deadly thug-like cord slackened.

"Help!" hoarsely called Tinker, his throat freed for a moment as they fell.

With a thud the combatants landed upon the hard floor below, the young detective undermost. He lay still for some seconds, fighting to regain the breath that the fall had seemed to knock out of his body. Then he felt his throat seized and held in a vice-like grip, and in spite of a desperate attempt to throw off the stranglehold, he knew that he was being slowly choked.

His assailant suddenly felt the young body grow limp, but perhaps thinking the boy might be playing "possum," he held on for a few seconds longer. Finally, Tinker slipped unconscious to the floor, and the man fumbled at the boy's pockets. A sharp, foreign exclamation burst from his lips as he found the wallet containing the passports, and he crept furtively to the door, listened intently, then crept out into the night.

Tinker lay in the dark barn without sound or movement.

For an hour all was silent, then sounded the savage, deep-throated bay of the bloodhound.

It grew nearer, and soon the door was flung open and Pedro, closely followed by his master, sprang to the boy's side with a deep growl.

"My heavens!" muttered Blake. "What's this?"

Sexton Blake, finding that Tinker had not followed, had returned to the barn. His heart thumping, he flashed his torch upon the inert figure. The white face was drawn, the eyes closed, the lips faintly tinged with blue.

"Tinker!" groaned the detective. "Fool that I was to leave you!"

He knelt down. A cry of anger burst from his lips as he noticed the silk lariat and livid bruises upon the young neck. He slipped his hand beneath the lad's waistcoat and found with relief that the heart was beating, although jerkily.

After loosening the cord he took an emergency flask from his pocket and held it to the blue lips. The colour welled slowly back into the pale cheeks, and soon Tinker opened his eyes.

"Tinker, dear lad! What has happened?"

"Is that you, guv'nor?" Tinker said faintly. "I thought I was a goner that time! Someone surprised me while I was searching, and tried to throttle me. I wonder what his game was, and who he was? Do you think he could have been Gunga Dass?"

"Whoever he was he shall pay dearly for this cowardly attack," Blake said sternly. "I have a strong conviction that it was Gunga Dass. Pedro led me almost to the station, but then the scent branched off, and led me back by another route in the direction of the barn here. Dass was evidently making for the railway-station, as we surmised, but, becoming aware of his loss of the passports, he returned for them. Finding you here, and suspecting that they were in your possession, he attacked you."

Tinker felt feebly in his pockets.

"I hope the scoundrel did not get them?" Blake said anxiously.

"He's got them, guv'nor!" Tinker spoke in tones of consternation. "I'm a nice beauty to be trusted with anything! Great thump! That chap's pinched the passports—and we're done!"

The detective groaned with bitter disappointment.

"But you are not to blame, lad," he said, with a compassionate glance at the white, rueful face. "I must get you back to the inn; you are unfit to continue the search. Afterwards I will go to the station and try to get Dass before he can board the London train."

"I'll manage alone," Tinker gasped. "You get on, guv'nor—no time to lose!"

Tinker returned slowly with Pedro to the Bull's Head. Blake was reluctant to let him go alone in the lad's weak state, but he realised that the plucky youngster was right. If he would stay the flight of Gunga Dass, not a moment must be lost. He hurried off in the direction of the station, at the run.

About half the distance travelled, Sexton Blake heard the low rumble of an approaching train in the distance, and he increased his pace to a sprint.

But to his chagrin he reached the station only to see the red tail-lights of the express retreating into the distance. With an exclamation of annoyance he went to the booking-office.

"Did you notice if a man of colour travelled by the London mail train?" he inquired, as the clerk attended him.

"Yes, sir! Rum looking beggar, too. Booked a third single to Liverpool Street," answered the clerk.

"Ah! Can you wire through to Liverpool Street?" Blake asked quickly. "The man is a suspected person, and I want him detained."

"I'm afraid not, sir. The telegraphist has gone off duty. This is the last train through, and the office is locked and he's taken home the key. You might try the post-office, though. Thought there was something suspicious about the man, the furtive way he was slinking about the station. The 'phone is in the telegraphist's room, too, so I can't even get at that!"

Blake thanked the man and hurried down the High Street to the post-office. When he arrived half an hour later, he found the place in darkness. He rapped the door vigorously, but it was not until five minutes had elapsed that the sash of an upstairs window was slammed open.

"Who's there?" came an indignant female voice, as a night-capped head appeared out of the window. "Why can't you let folk abide in their beds without disturbance at this hour? The post-office closes at six!"

"Hurry, madam!" Blake said impatiently. "I represent the police, and have an extremely urgent trunk call to put through."

The head disappeared. After considerable delay a light appeared in the shop, and the door was cautiously opened a few inches.

"The police you said, sir, I think? Where's your uniform?"

The woman looked suspiciously at the de-

tective, who was furious at the waste of precious time.

"My name is Sexton Blake. I am a private detective from London. My good lady, will you open the door? It is imperative that I get through to London without delay. Get a trunk call through to the railway police at Liverpool Street at once! Can you do it before the mail train arrives?"

The door was fully opened to him now, and Blake stepped into the shop. The post-mistress looked doubtful as she lit the lamp and went to the 'phone.

"I'll do my best, sir. It only gives me ten minutes, though, and they don't do things very briskly at Inglesbury Exchange after six o'clock."

She took up the receiver, but it was some time before her repeated "Hailos" were answered.

"Hallo! Hallo! Is that Inglesbury? Get me on to rail police, Liverpool Street at once. Official call." She turned to Blake. "I can't do any more, sir. It depends how long they take from Inglesbury."

The detective paced the shop restlessly, watch in hand, and the precious minutes ticked slowly away. Finally, he replaced the watch in his pocket.

"We are too late," he said, in chagrined tones. "If the train arrives correct to scheduled time, the man will have got clean away."

The receiver spluttered and buzzed.

"Hold the line!" the post-mistress called excitedly. Then, turning to Blake: "I've got them, sir!"

Blake sprang to the 'phone.

"Hallo! Is that Liverpool Street? Good! Sexton Blake, of Baker Street, speaking. Is Sergeant Brown there? He is! Fetch him quickly, then. . . . That you, Brown? Get to the arrival platform of the mail train from Wierdale at once. Arrest Hindoo travelling third. You can't mistake him. I will explain afterwards."

For ten minutes there was silence, then the receiver spluttered again.

"Too late? The train had arrived and the passengers gone before you could get there? All right, Brown! It wasn't your fault, I know. Try to pick up the nigger's trail and wire me results. Hindoo named Gunga Dass, carrying passports Bombay to Tilbury."

He replaced the receiver on the hook.

He felt that it was the end of the hunt—that the man—Gunga Dass—had slipped through his fingers. Lost in the congested foreign quarters of the East End of London, it might be impossible to again get on his track. And the lost passports had robbed Blake of every shred of evidence of benefit to Lady Hartley!

Evidence that his own brilliant deductions had been verified—yes, he had that. But not one shred of legal evidence that would be accepted in her defence. He must begin the search for Gunga Dass and the missing ruby afresh—and it would be a far more difficult search now.

Despondent, Blake returned to Tinker at the inn.

CHAPTER 4.

The Inquest — Mulberry's Evidence — The Arrest!

THE following morning, Sexton Blake, leaving Tinker—who was still badly shaken—in the care of the innkeeper's wife, walked to Wierdale Court, where he found Sir John Currier alone—Jim having gone to the Larches to be with his unhappy fiancée in her trouble as much as possible.

"You're a beauty, Blake," rapped out the old man, who, in his agitation was pacing—, rather, limping—the library, indifferent to his gout. "Thought you'd deserted us! Where have you been? What do you think of this—this horrible affair? Jim's off his head about it. Murder! Good heavens! And these fools of police dare—dare to suspect Lady Hartley! And all this fuss about a cursed nigger, too! I don't know what the world's coming to!"

Sexton Blake had heard of Sir John's deep prejudice against "colour." In his administrative duties in India the old Civil Servant had formed this prejudice, and it was difficult to persuade him that one "nigger" more or less in the world was worth a "fuss." Blake did not argue the point that a coloured man's murder was as important in the eyes of British law as that of a white man. He gave Sir John his reasons for changing to the local inn briefly instead.

"I must apologise for seeming want of courtesy, Sir John, in suddenly ceasing to be your guest. But in such a time as this I like to be in a position to move unhampered and unobserved. Has anything

further transpired?" "Nothing," grunted Sir John. He sat down and looked up at Blake with a very worried expression. "Blake, this is a terrible thing. I was driven over to the Larches yesterday afternoon, and saw Lady Hartley. She refused to explain anything—absolutely refused. Jim has wired to his barrister friend, Graham Wyld, to take up her defence—if it comes to a defence. The inquest is fixed for the day after to-morrow. I suppose you will attend?"

"Yes, certainly," Blake said.

"Do you think she'll be arrested?"

"If Lady Hartley maintains her present extraordinary silence, yes," answered the detective.

"But—but you don't think her guilty? Heavens, man, why should she have—" He paused. "Have you found anything out, Blake? What were you up to last night, as you changed your quarters from here to the inn?"

"I was following a slight clue, but unfortunately it led to nothing tangible," Blake replied. "It is still possible of development, however, and for the present I prefer to say

nothing about my small discoveries—not even to the police, or at the inquest," he added. "It is never wise to lay all one's cards on the table too early. Things get into the papers, and the persons you are looking for get warned."

"I understand. But, hang it, Blake, you might tell me—"

"When I have anything to tell—yes," said the man from Baker Street quietly. "At present I have not."

Sir John grunted. "Where's Tinker?"

"At the inn. The boy met with a slight mishap last night, when we were searching in the woods. Got a nasty fall and a shock"—vaguely. "I thought it best to let him lie quiet for a few days."

Blake knew that until the inquest, and Lady Hartley's evidence, he could make no further move. He had wired through early that morning to Detective-Inspector Rollings, of Scotland Yard, informing that capable official of the outlines of the case, and asking that any man answering to his given description of Dass should be watched and shadowed if he appeared in London. It was not certain that Dass would go to London, however, and Blake realised that he was at a loose end.

His evidence against Dass was too utterly flimsy for it to be of any earthly use to Lady Hartley—if, indeed, it could be termed evidence at all. His only hope was to find the man in possession of the missing ruby, which would then substantially connect him with the crime. It was plain that his chances of doing this would be better if no mention of the ruby being missing were made at all; it would give Dass

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a false sense of security, and—if he were the murderer—a feeling of safety which would divest him of some of that extreme caution he was certain to display were the ruby mentioned at the inquest and in the newspaper reports of the affair.

Sexton Blake realised that he would have to move with extreme caution himself.

"It's plain," he reflected, "that there is a third person in the affair, as I suspected, and as the police do not yet suspect. Yet this third person—Dass—may possibly not be guilty of the actual murder. He was, as the passport described him, a servant to Bhur Singh, and Bhur Singh was a person of some importance in India. It looks as if these two men came from India after this mysterious ruby—which is probably the missing eye of the goddess Kali. But, if this is true, it only complicates the mystery. The ruby was sought not for its intrinsic but its religious value, in that case, and certainly, if this were the mission of these Hindoos, there lies in that fact no reason why Lady Hartley should not disclose all she knows.

"Let me reconstruct the case thus: Bhur Singh, accompanied by a native servant, came to England for this Kali ruby; he demanded it from her ladyship. She fetched it from her daughter, with apparently every desire, on knowing the nature of the stone, to restore it to the agents from the Kali temple from which it had been stolen twenty odd years ago. Why, then, did the matter end in murder? And, having so ended, why does Lady Hartley refuse to tell the plain and simple truth, if the murder was not committed by her?"

To these questions Sexton Blake could find no answer. If she gave the ruby to Singh, and Singh was afterwards murdered by Dass for the possession of the stone, why did she not tell all she knew, to put the police on the right track? The thing was unaccountable. Behind the death of Bhur Singh, and the missing jewel, lay some deeper motive, some less fathomable mystery, on the track of which the detective, with all his shrewdness, had not yet been able to set foot.

Hence it was that Sexton Blake resolved to make no further move in the case until the inquest had been held. For two days Tinker lay convalescing at the inn, and on the third day after the murder the inquest was held in the Assembly Room of the village inn, to which the body of the unknown "black man"—unknown even by name to all but Tinker and Sexton Blake—had been removed.

The coroner was the local doctor who had been called into the case on the day of the crime. The maid and butler from the Larches, and the Curriers, with Sexton Blake and Inspector Mulberry, were the chief witnesses.

The story of the grim discovery was retold, as the reader knows it, by Inspector Mulberry, who looked highly important as he glanced, with a gleam of triumph in his eyes, at the great London detective, who was accommodated with a chair near to the coroner.

"I believe that fellow's got something up

his sleeve," thought Blake uneasily, as he eyed the close-cropped bullet head. He had hoped that the case against Lady Hartley might fall through, owing to insufficient evidence to warrant her arrest, the verdict being "Wilful murder by some person or persons unknown."

But Blake did not like the inspector's look at all.

"Lady Hartley!" said the coroner.

She rose, and a little gasp ran round—a tribute to the calm, pale beauty of her. She stood up to face that assembly with a wonderful courage of which Blake had not thought her capable. The olive-tinted face was almost bloodless, but in the glorious eyes was the flame of some unquenchable resolve which all Blake's intuition could not enable him correctly to divine.

"According to the evidence of your maid, Lady Hartley, you received some days ago a letter which caused you some anxiety. Will you tell the Court what the nature of that letter was?"

"It was an anonymous letter, asking me to meet by appointment some unknown person. Naturally, I took no notice of it—I did not go."

"Have you any reason for thinking that person was the deceased who met his death in your house?"

"I do not know."

"I must ask your ladyship to be explicit." The coroner's lips had tightened. "At what time did the deceased enter your house?"

"It was between twelve and one in the morning—soon after my return from the party at Sir John Currier's house."

"What happened on his entering the room in which you were?"

"I do not remember. I fainted."

"It was a very long swoon, Lady Hartley! You were found lying, still unconscious, beside the deceased soon after dawn!"

"I—I think—" She paused. "My head ached so terribly. I think that, in falling, I must have struck my head against some of the furniture."

"Why did you faint—from something this man said to you, or merely the shock of his appearance?"

"The shock, I think—my recollections are so vague. I was terrified at a—a black man suddenly entering the house."

"Had you received any further letter warning you that this anonymous person might appear to you—any further communication from whatever?"

"I do not remember." Her ladyship's voice was lower and less confident. "My head is still aching badly: I remember so little of what happened that night. But I swear I had no knowledge that this man was dead until I recovered from my swoon, and they told me that he was."

"You are aware that this man has not been identified. Can you give any clue to his identity?"

"I cannot!"

Blake could not believe that she was actually lying, but that there was equivocation in her answers was beyond doubt. The coroner felt it; so did the whole Court. And as she read that expression on the small sea of faces her face flushed hotly, but it heightened rather than decreased the proud poise of the beautiful head.

One of the maids was recalled. In answer to the coroner the girl, in great agitation, admitted that the anonymous letter had been handed to her by a "dark gentleman" to give to her ladyship. Questioned further, she said that she could identify the man as the deceased.

"Inspector Mulberry!" said the coroner sharply.

It was now that Sexton Blake felt a real quail. He saw the bullet-headed inspector rise jauntily, and for a moment met the man's glance of scorn. Jim Currier went two shades paler, and edged a little nearer to Lillah, who now looked like death itself. The atmosphere of the room was electric with the tense feeling that something of extra importance was about to be divulged. Blake had seen the inspector pass a note quietly to the coroner when Lady Hartley was giving her evidence.

"You have something of importance to communicate," the coroner said. "What is it?"

"I found this letter, sir, when searching the library at the Larches, on the morning following the murder," Mulberry said, and handed a sheet of notepaper to the coroner. "I think, sir, you will find it throws considerable light upon the

The coroner waved him to silence; he did not want to know what Inspector Mulberry thought. He read the letter, adjusting his gold-rimmed glasses in order to read the neat and minute writing. He read it to the jury aloud, and it ran thus:

"Lady Hartley will meet the writer to-night at the drive end, at sunset, and must observe secrecy as to this appointment, otherwise she must be prepared to have her secret revealed to the world. She must bring with her the price previously demanded for silence.—B. S."

A pin might have been heard to fall in the room. The coroner, in an impressive voice, recalled her ladyship.

"Your ladyship has heard this letter read. Who was this man, and what was it that he demanded of you?"

"I have nothing further to say!"

Graham Wyld, her counsel, who held a watching brief, now rose; he had not hitherto interfered.

"On behalf of Lady Hartley, sir," said Wyld crisply, "I wish to state to this Court that her further evidence and her defence will be reserved!"

He knew that nothing now could save her from arrest. And the coroner, bowing coldly, quickly concluded the case. In his summing-up he said:

"The question for you to decide is not motive

but how and by whom this man met his death. The medical evidence has told you that he died by some hand other than his own; the wound could not have been self-inflicted. By whom, then, was he killed? There is no doubt as to the instrument of death; it was the small jewelled dagger which Lady Hartley admits was hers, and used as a paper-knife in the library of her home. She was found unconscious with this man when he was discovered dead, and admitted that she was present in that room with him when he entered it; hence she must have been present when he died in that room.

"That he was attempting to blackmail her for some reason is suggested by this letter found by the police, and when considering the letter, and its intent, you will recall Lady Hartley's refusal to explain either the "price" she was to pay this blackmailer, or reveal to us his identity over and above the initials signed to this letter—B. S. Upon this evidence you will find your verdict—as to by whose hand the deceased died."

Without leaving the court the verdict came terribly to the ears of Jim Currier, and the lovely girl who was to become his bride.

"Wilful murder against Lady Hartley!"

That was the sum total of their verdict, though not expressed in that form; they found, those twelve men who had listened with horror and dark suspicion to the story unfolded to their ears, that the unknown man had been killed "with intent," and that the evidence pointed to the fact that he had been killed by her ladyship.

Sexton Blake was too wise to interfere; he knew that at this stage no power on earth, no theory of his, could stay the tide of the law. Everything now depended on what discoveries might come to light between the inquest and Lady Hartley's trial on the capital charge. Moreover, his own faith in Lady Hartley had received a rude shock.

A secret! A blackmailer who had threatened to reveal that "secret" unless she paid his "price!" And the blackmailer found dead, stabbed by her own weapon, in her own room!

Blake had not disclosed the fact that she had obtained the ruby from Lillah, presumably the "price" of the blackmailer. Had he done so it would have looked blacker still. He sat with grim face as the coroner made out his warrant for the arrest of Lillah's mother.

The last sad picture he took away with him of that tragic scene was Lillah fainting in her lover's arms, and the imploring eyes of Jim Currier fixed upon him, seeming to say: "Our only hope lies in you, Blake; for God's sake don't fail us!"

Sexton Blake now turned for one last look at Lady Hartley. She stood, after one heart-rending glance at her daughter—a glance that spoke of love and adoration—proudly erect between the two constables who had advanced to her side. And as he saw her thus, that splendid pride did not seem possible in a murderess; rather, it was the spirit of one resolved

to bear a cross unflinchingly, of one leaning upon the strength of her own conscious innocence—yet daring not, for some strange and mysterious reason, to divulge the truth that would save her—though that salvation were from lifelong imprisonment—even from the gallows itself!

"She is innocent!" he muttered. "But why doesn't she tell the truth—why doesn't she clear herself, as I believe she could do if she willed it?"

All he could do now was to endeavour to get on the trail of Gunga Dass, and after offering what sympathy he could to Jim Currier and his father, and giving his promise to proceed with his investigations of the case, he left the inn with Tinker, who was now recovered from his experience of the night of the murder, and, entering the Grey Panther, which was awaiting them, Blake, Tinker, and Pedro swiftly covered the miles that lay between Wierdale and Baker Street.

CHAPTER 5.

Rollings of the Yard—Blake's Startling Theory—Tinker off to Shadow Dass.

"DETECTIVE-INSPECTOR ROLLINGS is upstairs, sir," announced Mrs. Bardell. "He's bin waiting and grumbling in the insulting-room—mostly grumbling—this last hour, and I'm pleased you're returned safe an' sound, seein' as his language was gettin' worse every minute, and I 'ad to close the kitchen door, it not being fit for Christian ears—"

But Mrs. Bardell was addressing empty air. Blake, who had just returned from the inquest, was in no mood for the good lady's chatter, and after bidding Tinker house the car at the garage, he bounded upstairs to the consulting-room.

Detective-Inspector Rollings, C.I.D., Scotland Yard, had been pacing impatiently up and down the room, but as Blake entered, he sank into a chair with a sigh of relief.

Rollings was a square-jawed, capable-looking man of about forty, with a pair of twinkling blue eyes which belied the sternness of his features. Yet those amiable eyes could become as hard and piercing as gimlets; Rollings of the Yard was a man whose name and dogged tenacity was feared nearly as much in the great underworld of crime as Blake's own. Many a crook, now toiling despairingly in the stone quarries, to the clink of pick and harsh commands of the warders, cursed the day that had seen them so unfortunate as to cross paths with the C.I.D. man.

He had worked much with Blake in the past, and by reason of his high position at the Yard had often rendered invaluable aid to the private detective, particularly in that intricate mystery which Blake had labelled in his diary as "The Case of The Death's Head Moth."

"So you've turned up at last, Blake!" he said warmly. "I've been cooling my heels this

last hour, and you know the chief doesn't regard my time as absolutely valueless—"

"Sorry, old man. The inquest on that dead nigger took longer than I expected. You received my wire, and the following letter as well, I suppose? Well, what news of Dass?"

The Yard man gave a shrug of his broad shoulders.

"None so far. I've had as many men out as I could spare after the chap, but no reports have been handed in up to the moment. I thought I'd run over to see if you can give me any further details?"

Filing and lighting his briar, Blake sank into his favourite chair. Then he told Rollings all that had transpired at the inquest, and of the finding of the two passports in the barn previously.

"You see, Rollings," he said, as he came to the end of his narrative, "I believe that these men, Singh and Dass, the men whose names are on the passports, also their photos, came to this country from India to get the ruby. I believe it to be in Dass's possession now. He has, if that is so, been successful in carrying out the mission he and his master left India upon. His next move will obviously be to return to India with the jewel. Once in his own country the search for him would be practically hopeless, and we must concentrate on getting the fellow before he can slip away."

"What about the other nigger—the man you call Bhur Singh?"

"Without doubt, he is the murdered man. I recognised the photo on the passport as that of the unknown Hindoo, Rollings. As for Dass, we must use all our efforts to prevent him leaving England. If my reconstruction of the crime is correct, it was Dass who murdered Singh for the stone, after Singh had obtained it from Lady Hartley. To get hold of Dass, and prove my deductions correct, is the only possible way of saving a woman I believe innocent."

Rollings looked thoughtfully across at Blake, who sat half hidden by a cloud of tobacco smoke.

"My position in this case is somewhat awkward, Blake," Rollings said slowly. "Everything that is material, according to the reports officially to hand, points to the guilt of Lady Hartley. You cannot substantiate your theories sufficiently for me to lay them convincingly before the chief and ask him for the authority to organise a strict watch on all outgoing boats. I can do this much, though. I am having the main ports watched for a very elusive gentleman we want badly, and while my men are on the job I will circulate what description you can give me of Dass amongst them."

Blake smiled a trifle grimly. He was painfully aware of the lack of material evidence against Dass. He had no evidence, save a bare footprint, that Gunga Dass had been to the Larches—none at all that Dass had been Tinker's assailant in the barn, or that he was in possession of the missing ruby. The passports, his most valuable evidence, Tinker had lost, and

without them his case appeared so flimsy that he could not expect the official police to back him.

"Thanks, Rollings," he said. "I'm grateful, and know that if you could do more, you would. This is going to be one of the many cases in which Tinker and I have to play a lone hand. So the official police have an idea that we are out on a wild goose chase! You know all the details now. What is your opinion of the affair?"

"Frankly this, Blake," he said. "The letter found by Mulberry is strong evidence that Lady Hartley was being blackmailed by this nigger whom you suspect to be Bhur Singh of the passports. Apparently the price demanded for his silence was the ruby, and according to your description of the gem, it was a stiff price, too. From that I infer that her 'secret' is no trivial one, but of such importance that she would give much, and do much, to prevent it becoming known to the world. That, you must admit, supplies a strong motive for murder. Realising that even to yield to the demands of Singh would be to live continually in false security, and to lay herself open to further blackmail, she stabbed the man in a desperate moment of terror."

He paused and looked at Blake to observe the effect of his words, but the detective's face was impassive, his eyes half veiled by their lids, as he sat back in a chair opposite Rollings and thoughtfully puffed at his disreputable pipe.

"If Dass was present at all," resumed Rollings, "it is likely that, seeing his master killed and her ladyship fall fainting to the floor, the man crept into the library and took the ruby. Naturally his next move would be to place as many miles between himself and the scene of the crime as possible. Until dusk the following evening he probably remained in hiding in the barn, then made for the station. Half-way there he missed the passports, and, returning, attacked young Tinker for their possession."

Blake regarded the Yard man shrewdly.

"But if Dass was only guilty of theft, why did he make such a desperate attempt to murder Tinker? It is hardly feasible that Dass would try to murder my assistant because Dass had collared this ruby."

"He badly wanted his passport, Blake," Rollings objected. "That would help out the motive for attempting to murder the lad. Without a passport, and being a foreigner, he would realise that it would be next to impossible for him to leave the country."

Sexton Blake slowly shook his head.

"There are many ways of dodging the passport authorities, Rollings," he answered with a smile. "How many times are you successful in arresting a man by watching the main ports? Not often I fear! Dass is no fool. A Hindoo, when it comes to protecting himself, seldom is. The man will probably work his passage back to India on a tramp—no questions asked aboard them, Rollings, as long as a man is a worker. It was not for his own passport that he attacked Tinker, but for his master's."

"But with what motive, Blake?"

"I think this. If Dass is the murderer, then it is important to him that Bhur Singh, his master, should not be identified, less suspicion fall on Dass, the servant of Bhur Singh. Singh is, in his own country, a man of high position, and the news of his murder would quickly reach India and create a stir in native circles. It would be known that Dass accompanied Singh, and thus the man would be under suspicion. And he would know that Bhur Singh could be identified only by means of the passport."

Blake's theory had a note of conviction, and Rollings was silent for some moments.

"And what of this mysterious ruby you have told me of?" he asked at length. "Surely it is of little value to an illiterate Hindoo! It is such a magnificent jewel that if a description of it were circulated it would easily be recognised, and the man would be detained if he tried to dispose of it. Another thing: If Dass murdered Singh for its possession, as you believe, why didn't he wait until they were clear of the house, when the risk of detection would have been much less?"

"I have an idea that the affair is not one of common blackmail," Blake said quietly. "The ruby was not wanted because of its intrinsic value, but because it is an emblem of one of India's most powerful religions. Therefore it will not be offered for sale. I suspect that Dass's motive for murdering his master was because he was out for the glory that would come to the one who restored the jewel to the Temple."

"But what on earth has religion to do with it, Blake?" Rollings asked blankly. "What the dickens is this ruby?"

"Have you heard of Kali—mother goddess of the Hindoo faith?" inquired Blake.

Rollings regarded Blake from puzzled eyes.

"Read something about the lady, sometime or other," he said vaguely. "But, confound it all, I'm getting out of my depth. What are you aiming at now, Blake?"

Sexton Blake refilled his briar and sat quietly smoking for a few minutes before he spoke.

"Many years ago, the eye-fashioned out of a huge and magnificent ruby—was stolen from the brow of this goddess, in one of the jungle temples devoted to that idol," Blake said. "On the evening of the murder, Sir John Currier related to us at dinner the strange story of its disappearance. When he had finished I noticed that Lady Hartley was pale and unnerved, and I read unmistakable fear in her eyes. At the time I suspected little, but the subsequent events have led me to believe that the ruby she gave her daughter that night as a betrothal gift might have been that lost Eye of Kali!"

The Yard man stared at him in blank surprise.

"But, my dear Blake, how should a ruby, which is supposed to have been pinched from a Hindoo jungle temple, come into the possession of an English society lady?" he asked sceptically.

Sexton Blake dropped a bombshell.

"I am not so sure that she is an English lady!" he said quietly.

Rollings stared at Blake from incredulous eyes, his mouth gaping.

"What the—I say, Blake, draw it mild! That's stretching things a bit too far, you know. Why, her ladyship has moved, unquestioned, in the most exclusive circles of English society for years!"

"Rather startling, Rollings, I admit," Blake said calmly. "I will give you my reasons for thinking as I do. During the days before the inquest I made every possible inquiry. In his younger days, the late Sir Edward Hartley earned something of a reputation as a shooter of big game. He followed the sport in India for some time, and when he returned he brought back a wife. Where he married her no one seems to know, and the pair were strangely reticent. Mrs. Hartley—as she was then—had had a British education, and Hartley's friends accepted her as British, but I suspect that he married a woman not of English blood, and that the ruby is connected with her past."

"But why doesn't the woman speak if that's the case, and she was attacked for possession of the stone? By telling us the truth—if this is the truth, Blake—she could establish a defence. She could claim that she acted in self-defence. But by keeping silent she is pushing her head into a noose."

"Exactly," Sexton Blake agreed. "Her silence is the mystery!"

"And the lid upon your theory, Blake! If you were right she'd clear herself of this charge of murdering a blackmailer by informing us as to who this dead man and his servant are, and what their motive was in coming to England. Yet in spite of this loophole she remains silent. If she is innocent she would be sure to tell us all she knows and plead that she was defending her life from a fanatic!"

Blake was silent for some moments. He knew that Rollings's belief would be that of the jury, and could find every excuse for that belief. Why was Lady Hartley so strangely silent? That was the question that confronted him at every turn. The unanswered question that pointed so strongly to her guilt.

"Yes," he said, "in that lies the mystery I shall try to solve, Rollings. Why should this woman run so terrible a risk by refusing to tell us all she knows about the Kali ruby? No shame could rest on her for having possessed it, for it probably came innocently into her hands, and she was not aware of its religious nature. There is some deep, some greater, motive behind her silence than I can grasp as yet—but I mean to discover that motive."

Rollings shrugged deprecatingly.

"Even if you succeed in arresting this Gunga Dass, Blake, you will be no nearer the truth. The ruby in his possession would not implicate him seriously whilst Lady Hartley practically admits her own guilt by refusing to open her lips."

"I shall be a step nearer the solution of the mystery," Blake said. "I am convinced of his guilt and shall try to wring a confession from him. At any rate, his presence at the scene of the crime will help to ease the suspicion that falls upon Lady Hartley."

Rollings rose to his feet and took up his hat. "I'll do what I can, Blake," he said, holding out his hand. "I'm afraid you're on a white elephant, all the same. I'm due back at the Vard now, as they want me to identify a suspect they are bringing from Birmingham. Let me know what success you meet with, and I will 'phone you up if any of my men run across Gunga Dass."

Blake nodded, and the C.I.D. man, secretly believing that Sexton Blake, despite his usual clear-headedness, was on a false trail, made his way back to Scotland Yard.

Scarcely had he left the consulting-room than the door burst unceremoniously open and Tinker entered.

"Cheerio, guv'nor! I've seen to the car all right. Has Rollings been successful in tracing Dass? He wasn't looking any too pleased with himself when I passed him on the stairs."

Sexton Blake shook his head.

"No, Tinker. He is as sceptical as the rest. We shall have to play a lone hand. There is one chance left us now."

"And what is that, sir?" Tinker asked eagerly.

"Do you remember that there were some Urdu hieroglyphics on the back of the passport made out to Dass?"

"Yes, guv'nor. Address of a common lodging-house, I believe you said."

"Yes. It lies in a small street off the East India Dock Road. Perhaps you will remember the place. We had it raided some years ago for suspected cocaine and opium smugglers. It is a den of the worst type—a hovel glorified by the name of the 'Lotus Flower Cafe.' The scum of the seven seas frequent it, and its proprietor is a low-browed nigger with a record as black as his hide."

"I know it, sir. Kept by Pete Rahan, and lies next to those filthy little chop-suey joints. Phew! A pretty salubrious quarter!"

"You're right, my boy. I've got to send you there, too. Still, you know how to take care of yourself, lad. Get into a blue reefer suit, blue jersey, and peaked cap. Gunga Dass evidently jotted down the name for future reference. It was probably given him by a friend. Now that he is in wait for a tramp, as I suspect, it is quite on the cards that he will remain there in hiding until he is successful in signing on. What better place for him? It is near the docks, and he will meet seamen of his own race who would help him find a boat."

"Yes, I reckon you're right, guv'nor. I'll get on his trail at once, if possible. Shall I 'phone you any news I get, or come straight back for you?"

"Come back. I shall be away for an hour or so. I intend running down to Wierdale to see if

I can get any more information concerning the past of the Hartleys."

Sexton Blake gave his young assistant some further instructions, and an hour later Tinker started on his mission—little dreaming of what was to happen before he and his master met again.

CHAPTER 6.

The Lotus Flower Cafe—The Obliging Hindoo—The Trap.

TINKER, clad in blue reefer suit, jersey, and peaked cap, as Sexton Blake had directed, walked into Palm Tree Grove with the lurching roll that becomes characteristic with those who follow the sea.

Palm Tree Grove is not, as its picturesque name misleadingly denotes, a sylvan glade of the East, although the East has of recent years taken possession, but one of those squalid, cosmopolitan streets that branch off that main artery of London's docks—the East India Dock Road.

Outside the Lotus Flower Cafe, with its blistered, garish paintwork, stood a barrel-organ which, despite its battered aspect and tattered canvas, wheezed and clanged bravely the tune of a once popular song. A crowd of yellow-faced, nondescript children, tattered of clothing and with the indelible stamp of privation and, in many cases, crime, upon their pinched features, played half-heartedly in the gutters.

The unfortunate owner of the property flanking the grimy pavements had long since despaired of placing his property on a paying basis, and had allowed it to fall into decay. Doors and window-frames were void of paint, and weather-stained paper was bunched into the jagged holes that gaped in the curtainless windows.

Dagoes and mulattoes, fiercely moustached, lithe little Spaniards; big, fair and square-headed Swedes; copper-skinned Hindoos, and a sprinkling of the yellow races lounged in the door and alleyways, or squatted down on the pavements, engrossed in varied games of chance—flotsam borne to London's river on the tides of the seven seas.

Tinker's snub nose showed a distinct tendency to become a little more elevated as he pushed open the door of the Lotus Flower, and the hot smell of cooking, mingled with various other odours of the Orient, assailed his nostrils.

"Pouf! What a sniff!"

The young detective took a quick, comprehensive glance round.

A dozen or so men of colour sat eating and chattering at the ornamental bamboo tables. Coloured Chinese lanterns of fantastic shapes and hues, and emblazoned with a number of monsters unknown to natural history, provided a semi-Oriental atmosphere, together with the dyed mats of plaited rush which were littered about the scrupulously clean floor.

In a glass kiosk at the far end of the restaurant sat Pete Raham, a fat, low-browed Hindoo,

his greasy, ebony-black skin telling of his low caste. His nose was squat, and his heavy, repulsive features were deeply marked by the ravages of that pestilence of the East, smallpox. The black, blood-shot eyes held no look of welcome as Tinker seated himself at a vacant table.

After hesitating for a moment Raham lumbered his fat, ungainly figure towards Tinker, and eyed him searchingly.

"What you want?" he demanded suspiciously. "No Englese konnah here; only Hindoo. Malaam, sahib?"

"Yes, I malaam, old bean," Tinker returned cheerfully, looking serenely into the black, suspicious face. "Never mind about English konnah. Hindoo grub bo teak. Bring me curry and rice. Jeldee with it. I'm looking for a pal, and in a hurry."

With a grunt, but apparently satisfied, Pete Raham lumbered across the room and opened a door that, judging by the increased smell of cooking that pervaded the room, led into the kitchen.

While he was absent Tinker did a bit of rapid thinking. He knew he would have to go wary if he was to obtain news of Gunga Dass. If once the finger of suspicion was pointed to him as being a 'copper's mark,' he would be in a tight corner. Dass might even be one of the Hindoos eating in the restaurant now, for all the lad knew. He had but a vague description of his man to guide him; and, unfortunately, neither Tinker nor Blake had carefully noted the portrait on Dass's passport in the barn—the one of Singh had absorbed at the moment their full attention, as being that of the murdered man, and Tinker had been robbed of the papers before they had had time to study the other.

One Hindoo looks much the same as another to Western eyes. And, whatever vices are attributed to those of the East, whatever treachery they may show to those not of their own race, there exists amongst them the most perfect freemasonry in the world. Tinker knew that even the thumb-screws would not drag information from them should they suspect that his mission was the arrest of one of their own race.

Raham came from the kitchen and carried over a plaited straw tray on which lay a huge leaf piled high with boiled Madras rice, a smaller one of smoking goat's flesh, and an unleavened pancake, unsweetened, and of the hue of mottled lead.

He placed them on the table, and, seating himself near, studied the young detective intently from thick-lidded eyes.

"You been India?" he grunted. "Not many Englese sahibs come to café. They not like Hindoo konnah."

"Many a time, skipper. You may savvy I'm quartermaster on one of the B.I.S.N.C. boats running passengers and cargo between Tilbury and Bombay," Tinker said easily.

At first he made but a pretence of eating.

Then, realising that Hindoo "konnah" is not so bad as it looks, fell to more heartily.

"What ship you on? My brudder he serang on British India boat," lied Raham, impassive of countenance, and still slightly suspicious.

Tinker looked uneasy for a moment.

"The—the—" Then with fervent relief he remembered the name of the boat that Gunga Dass and his ill-fated master had arrived by.

"The ss. Margha," he said blandly.

It had been a tight corner, and had taken all Tinker's quick wits to prevent himself from giving the first name that came into his head. That might have been fatal, for the Lotus Flower was a popular rendezvous with coloured seamen, and Raham would in all probability be as familiar with London's shipping as the Port of London authorities themselves.

"What you doing this way?" asked Raham. "You paid off and looking for another boat?"

"No, cap'n. I'm lookin' for a shipmate o' mine—Gunga Dass by name, an' a Hindoo. He's a decent sort o' cove, and when we docked I promised to put him right an' show him the ropes, as he'd never been to London afore. I got three sheets in the breeze larst night, though, and lost him. I don't want the poor bloke to come to any 'arm, so I thought I'd skull about this part an' look for him, as he'd be like to make for his own countrymen, so as to feel more shipshape. Know the chap at all?"

Raham eyed the boy keenly, but Tinker had not been the pupil of Sexton Blake, that past-master of disguise, for nothing. A little walnut-juice had stained his hands and face, cunningly pencilled lines about his eyes added a good five years to his appearance, and his rough reefer suit and hands bore evidence of apparent toil. The wire-embroidered, gilded badge of the British India Company was on his peaked cap, and a faint suggestion of the reek of tar clung to him. Pete Raham was satisfied.

"Yes, me know Gunga Dass. Him very good man, and came from India on ss. Margha, I know. He slept here two nights, but he pay me this morning and say he no like London, and he go back to Bombay. He ship as fireman on the tramp Sea Spray, bound for Port Said, Bombay and Karachi."

Without letting the Hindoo see it, Tinker eyed him searchingly. But there was something in the heavy-jowled face that told Tinker that Raham was not lying. His expression was now as amiable as nature would allow it to be, and the young detective, who had studied human nature under his master, knew why. Nothing gratifies a man of colour so much as the idea that a white man has respect and liking for their race, and the lad had luckily struck the right note when saying he had wanted to befriend Dass.

"Shiver me spars! He's soon got choked off London! Is there any chance of 'aving a pow-wow with him before he sails?" inquired Sexton Blake's disguised assistant.

"Yes, you be able see Dass all right," answered Raham, his thick lips twisting in a

smile that revealed glistening white teeth. "Sea Spray, she no lift hook till six for the fairway. Then she sail at seven. She moored alongside nine berth, third jetty down from the Customs House. Dass he very good man, sah. Very good man indeed."

Tinker, elated at his success, rose to his feet. "Right-on, cap'n. What's the damage?"

See you again soon, for that's the nicest bit o' Hindoo konnah I've tasted since I left Bombay. You've got a swell mess-room here, too."

"Ake rupee, sah," said Raham, beaming with pleasure. "Me bo teak cook and very nice restaurant." He bent closer, and, after a furtive look round from his bloodshot eyes, lowered his voice. "You like smoke pipe when you come back, sah? Very good and plenty Engleese sailor like smoke pipe!"

Tinker laid one shilling and fourpence on the table to pay for his meal.

"Not for me, my hearty. Tell you what, though. I've a pal who's hot stuff on dope, and I'll bring him round one night," Tinker said with a grin.

"Very good, sah," beamed Raham, salaaming as low as his fat carcase would allow.

Tinker made his way to the street, and his grin broadened as he thought who that pal of his would be. None other than Detective-Inspector Rollings, C.I.D., who was, as Tinker had said, "hot stuff on dope"—and on the vendors of it, too!

"Phew! Opium joint, too!" he muttered, as he reached the end of the squalid street. "You're well out of that, Tinker, old son! Now for the pal of your bosom, Dass!"

Thrusting his hands deep into his trousers pockets, he made for the docks with rolling gait. A Customs officer at the main gates admitted him without question, and, inside, the lad looked about the vast anchorage with interest.

Berthed at that hive of industry, the East India docks, are craft of every nation. It is the most cosmopolitan port in the world. Four-masted sailing schooners, given a fresh lease of life owing to the high cost of fuel, lay, with furled sails, alongside sleek, white-painted liners, unashamed of their patched and half-rotting timbers. Junks from the Far East with fantastically carved bows, squat, tall-masted, sturdy-looking brigs from Frisco, barques from Melbourne and Sydney, and rust-encrusted tramps from almost everywhere, were rapidly being relieved of their cargoes by giant, clanging cranes and an army of dockers and stevedores.

Anchored at nine berth was the tramp Sea Spray, and Tinker, making out the grime-covered name painted on her bows, regarded her with interest.

She was a squat-bowed vessel of some two thousand tons, looking what she undoubtedly was, a freelance of fortune, and a wanderer from Hong Kong to Frisco, picking up what cargo and crew she could.

A wisp of black smoke curled dejectedly from her battered funnel. The crew as varied in

race as were her ports of calling, were batten-
ing down her after-holds. Her deck winches
banged and clanged crazily to the snorting
donkey-boiler.

"I don't wonder that Dass found a boat so
easily," muttered Tinker. "It's a tub any-
body but a nigger would fight shy of. Wonder
who that johnny is coming from the stoke-
hold? He looks like a Hindoo."

The native who had attracted Tinker's atten-
tion walked to the taffrail. His thin, brown
legs were wrapped in a filthy cotton dhoti, and
he wore a cheap native shirt of gaudy design.
Bound about his head was the tattered remnant
of a once white turban.

Their eyes met, and he regarded Tinker with
apparently friendly curiosity.

"What you want?" he called. "You want
see skipper sahib? He gone ashore to buy
konnah."

There was a hint of a pleasant smile lurking
in the soft, dark eyes, and a cheerful, roguish
expression on the lean, dusky face. Tinker
decided to trust the man.

"No, old son, I don't want the skipper. I'm
looking for a chap named Gunga Dass. Know
him at all?"

"Wait a minute, sahib," said the Hindoo fire-
man; and, clambering over the taffrail, he
descended a rope-ladder and joined Tinker on
the jetty below. The smile had vanished from
the dark eyes, but the boy was too keen on
his mission to notice it.

"What you want Dass for?" he asked
blandly. "Him very bad man. Skipper he gave
him job as trimmer, but Dass he stole ship's
stores, and skipper kicked him off Sea Spray.
Dass him very big thief!"

"And where did Dass go after that?" asked
Tinker, trying to conceal his disappointment.

"What you want know for? You after him
one time?" asked the Hindoo.

The man appeared to have little liking for
Dass, and, as time was pressing, Tinker decided
to enlist his aid in the search.

"Look here, my dusky friend, I'm a police-
agent—malaam?" he said quietly.

The Hindoo nodded his head.

"I malaam, sahib," he said.

"Well, that's all serene, then, and no larks,
or you'll find yourself in trouble," Tinker
warned him. "I'm after this man Dass, and
I'll make it worth your while to put me on
his track. Fifty rupees isn't to be sneezed at,
and they are yours for the job. It's more than
you'll earn on that tub in a couple of months,
I reckon."

A strange light, which might have been
greed, flickered in the dark eyes of the Hindoo.

"You give me fifty rupees, sahib, and I take
you to Dass," he said eagerly. "Him hiding in
old wharf about a mile upstream." He stretched
out a lean, brown hand for the money Tinker
drew from his wallet. "I take you, sahib. Me
very honest man, and you can trust me. In
half an hour's time it will be eight bells, and
then I'm free till we sail. You come back
then, sahib?"

Tinker drew a breath of relief, for he now
seemed within an ace of success.

"Right-ho! I'll go for a walk, but will be
back by the time you finish your watch. Be
on the corner of the jetty yonder, and mum's
the word. Dass might have one of his own
kidney knocking about who might warn him."

"I malaam, sahib," said the Hindoo; and
after salaaming, he clambered aboard.

Tinker took a quick, interesting walk round
the docks, feeling decidedly pleased with himself.
His luck was in. Feeling sure of getting his man
now, Tinker, after half an hour had elapsed,
made his way back to the jetty. True to his
word, the Hindoo fireman awaited him.

"Good man! Tinker said, as he joined him.
"Lead the way, and when we get near the
place keep quiet."

Picking his way through the bales of mer-
chandise that littered the jetty, the Hindoo
made for a more deserted part of the docks,
and after a mile had been traversed, halted
and pointed a brown finger to a dilapidated
shed that lay a couple of hundred yards ahead.

"That's where Gunga Dass is hiding, sahib. I
guess he going to sleep there, too, for I saw
him steal some empty sacks and take them in
tills afternoon."

Motioning the Hindoo behind him, Tinker crept
cautiously towards the shed. His hand went
to his hip pocket and the cold touch of his
automatic gave him a feeling of assurance.

The place was deserted. It was a part of
London's dockland that had long since fallen
into decay, and was littered with tumble-
down sheds and crumbling warehouses.

Reaching the shed, Tinker tip-toed to the
remnants of a window and peered within. On
a heap of sacks in a far corner lay a Hindoo.
His face was partly turned from the lad,
and he was quietly smoking, apparently un-
conscious that he was being watched.

"Him Gunga Dass," whispered the Hindoo
fireman in Tinker's ear.

Tinker's eyes lit up with satisfaction. Softly
creeping to the door, he flung it open, his
automatic at the ready. He could not be
sure that the man was Gunga Dass, but was
bent upon bold measures.

"Hands up, Dass!" he cried sternly. "You're
wanted!"

The Hindoo sprang to his feet and faced the
lad. His eyes were mocking, his lips parted
in a bland smile. It was not the expression
one would expect to find on the face of a
murderer, who, fleeing from justice, suddenly
finds himself threatened with arrest.

Tinker was puzzled, and a sense of uneasiness
crept over him. The man seemed to be acting
a part. He threw his forebodings aside, though,
and his boyish face set grimly. Gunga Dass,
if this were he, should not escape him a second
time.

"Up with 'em, Dass, or I'll let daylight
through you!" he bluffed, advancing into the
gloomy shed. "So I've got you at last, my
beauty." He advanced towards the Hindoo, who
was still smiling inscrutably. "You won't be

wearing that smile on your ugly mug for long, my pippin! Where's the ruby you pinched from your master, Bhur Singh? Where are those drinkin' passports? What the dickens

Tinker broke off suddenly with a sharp cry of alarm. A suspicious sound from the rear made him whip round suddenly, and the Hindoo, now finding himself uncovered by the wicked-looking, squat-nosed automatic, sprang forward and gripped the revolver arm.

Then, from the shadows crept two more Hindoos, who, joined by the treacherous fireman from the Sea Spray, raced forward and joined in the fray. With an effort, Tinker wrenched free his arm, but the action caused the automatic to slip from his fingers and clatter harmlessly to the floor. With a cry of dismay the youngster, striking out desperately at the brown figures that closed round him, fought his way to the wall and placed his back against it. He realised that the wily fireman from the Sea Spray was a traitor—probably a friend of Dass—who had lured him into a trap, which, for him, might prove to be a death trap!

"Help! Help!" he shouted.

Then, realising that to call for help in that lonely spot was but to waste precious breath, he reserved it for the joint attack that swiftly followed his cry.

The first man to reach him was the rascally fireman. He aimed a vicious blow at the lad's face, but, ducking swiftly, Tinker evaded the blow. The man's impetuosity brought him dangerously near, and Tinker grunted his satisfaction as his bunched knuckles crashed into the dusky face. The Hindoo dropped as if poleaxed.

But that only accounted for one, and the odds were heavily against the plucky youngster. He fought desperately, but numbers told; and finally he was borne, struggling, to the ground.

The fireman, nursing his sparsely-bearded jaw, staggered to his feet, and snatching up a billet of heavy ship's teak, swayed towards the helpless lad, now pinned down to the floor. The amiable look had quite vanished from the dark face, and was replaced by an expression of bestial savagery. Tinker's blow had awakened the latent red passions of the East, and murder shone ugly in the black eyes. Raising the billet aloft the Hindoo brought it down with cruel force upon the lad's head.

A searing, agonising pain racked Tinker's temples, and after a low groan, he lay limp, with closed eyes.

The fireman rapped out a sharp command in Hindustani, and his villainous-looking allies went to a corner of the shed and took up a coil of rope.

A slip-knot was placed round the lad's neck, and the rope was then carried down his back and lashed tightly round his ankles. It was the true thug method, for should Tinker struggle for freedom his legs would draw the slip-knot tight and slow strangulation would follow. Next they lashed his wrists firmly behind his back, and the fireman gagged him with a filthy piece of cotton waste.

After drawing the unconscious youth to a corner of the shed, where it would be impossible for him to be seen from the window, they silently left him, fastening the stout door firmly behind them.

For several hours Tinker lay motionless. Day merged slowly into night, and with the enveloping darkness came the scurrying and squeaking of wharf rats. A hundred pairs of tiny, luminous green eyes advanced slowly towards the motionless figure.

One, slightly bolder than the rest, scurried across the pale face, and after stirring uneasily, Tinker opened lustreless eyes. An excruciating pain racked his head, and for some minutes he fought for mental clarity.

Then all came slowly, painfully back.

With a despairing groan that sent the rats scurrying back into the darkness, he struggled weakly at his bonds.

A slight but increasing pressure round his throat and neck puzzled his pain-fogged brain for a moment.

Then he realised the truth. He was bound in a way that meant certain death if he struggled for liberty.

"My hat!" groaned Tinker. "I'm done for!"

Then he lay thinking.

Encouraged by his silence, and emboldened by their ravenous hunger, the rodents crept slowly back to the still figure.

Tinker had already realised their presence. His eyes filled with horror and beads of perspiration were now stealing out on his forehead. So that was to be his fate!

He was helplessly bound in this rat-infested shed that for years had been neglected. It might be weeks before anyone came near, and by that time no trace of him would be left!

"Guv'nor!" he muttered, a dry sob in his throat. "If you only knew!"

Slowly, surely, those tiny pin-points of greenish-phosphorescent light crept nearer. Tinker watched them in fascinated silence. The sharp nip of needle-like teeth in his ankle was magnified by his tensed nerves into unutterable agony, and he kicked out his bound legs blindly.

The rats scuttled back, but not so far this time, for they had become aware of Tinker's limitations. The rope about his neck had tightened with the effort, and again fear crept into the lad's eyes. Fear this time of his own strength of mind to withstand the voice of the tempter—for he knew that, by flexing his leg muscles, he could tighten the fatal cord around his neck!

"It would be so easy. Only keep on struggling and merciful oblivion would come!" said the voice. "Better to die so, than by the teeth of these vermin!"

Nearer and nearer crept those fascinating pin-points of green light, and louder and more insistent grew the voice, urging the hapless lad to take the less horrible of the two deaths that faced him—strangulation or being devoured alive.

CHAPTER 7.

Sexton Blake Obtains Some Promising Information — Pedro to the Rescue — The Aniseed Trail.

"M R. SIX-TON BLAKE, sah!" announced the grinning Jackson, his teeth suggesting a newly-opened piano as he ushered the celebrated criminologist into the library at Wierdale Court. "He say him come for palaver, sah."

Sir John Currier, his gout-swollen foot propped up by many cushions, grunted his satisfaction.

"Gad, Blake, I'm relieved to see you here at last! You have cleared up the mistake by now, of course—for it is a mistake. Lady Hartley could no more have killed that confounded nigger than fly. Not that I'd reckon it a terrible crime if she had. The skunk was blackmailing her and there are too many of the fiends about. They want thinning down a bit."

Sexton Blake compressed his lips. Sir John, in the course of his career in the Indian Service had formed an intense dislike towards what he termed "nigger blood." But the great detective did not sympathise with those harsh and prejudiced views. And the law is a great leveller of colour and caste. Murder is the capital charge be the victim of the East or West.

But he did not at the moment choose to counter Sir John's views with his own.

"I'm afraid that my investigations have met with but little success so far," Blake said quietly. "Of Lady Hartley's innocence I am still convinced, but proof of that innocence is another matter, Currier. Her ladyship will not help me. Her refusal to reveal what she knows concerning the dead man and his errand that night forces me to work wholly in the dark; and, forming theories on the slenderest of clues, as I am, it will probably be long before the shadow of suspicion is lifted from her."

The old baronet looked troubled. The fine shoulders were not so square, the eyes not so twinkling as they had been a short week ago. Stern old martinet as Sir John was, Blake knew that a human heart, capable of deep feeling, beat beneath that iron exterior, although jealously concealed; for the old man, like many who have roughed it in the wide spaces of the earth, considered emotion a weakness.

"But you have your suspicions as to whom that guilty person is, Blake?" said Sir John.

"Yes, I have," Blake replied. "But my deductions and theories are worthless unless backed by legal proof. I believe Tinker to be on the trail of the man I suspect. I will tell you this much, Sir John: If once I can get this suspected person, I feel convinced that I shall have made an appreciable step towards establishing Lady Hartley's innocence."

"And who is this damned mysterious third person?" grunted Sir John.

"His name is Gunga Dass, a Hindoo servant of the murdered man."

Sir John Currier rose softly and brought his clenched fist forcibly down upon the medicine table that stood at his side.

"Another confounded nigger!" he boomed

irascibly. "Pon my soul, Blake, I believe you without proof, for those skunks are always up to some devilry. But what the thunder brought them here? And what did that blackmailing letter mean? It seems impossible that Lady Hartley could have any connection with the brown dogs. But wait a minute! Poor old Sir Edward was out there in his earlier days, and I wonder whether one of those native secret societies swore a vendetta against him? He was a fine fellow, but inclined to be reckless, and it is possible he rubbed them the wrong way some time or other, and that this blackmailing affair is one of revenge."

"Possibly you are right, Currier," Blake said. "You will excuse me now. The real object of my visit was to pick up Jim, and go with him to the Larches. I wish to question the servants, for, possibly, disliking Inspector Mulberry, on account of his swaggering confidence of their mistress's guilt, they withheld information which might prove valuable. Where is Jim?"

"The boy is already at the Larches," Sir John said. "He is at his wits' end, and poor Lillah is prostrate with worry and grief. You and I are old friends, Blake. You will do your best, old man? You won't let this wretched affair spoil their lives? The gruff voice faltered, the firm lips twitched. "All their hopes for the future are centred in you, for Lillah refuses to marry the lad until her mother's name is cleared."

Sexton Blake clasped the hand of his friend warmly.

"I shall do my best, Sir John," he said. "We must all hope for the shadow to be lifted from those two young lives and that of Lady Hartley. I shall spare no effort to bring the guilty person to justice. But I must leave you now, for there is much to be done, and my time down here must be short."

Something of the old spirit flashed in the blue eyes of the bluff old commissioner.

"Gad, Blake! I believe you will succeed, too! Cut along, then, and try to cheer the boy up."

Sexton Blake, at the wheel of the Grey Panther, was soon speeding toward the Larches. When he arrived, Jenkins, the butler, answered the door.

"Good-morning, sir!" he said, recognising the detective. "Miss Lillah and Master Jim are in the morning-room. They have just returned from visiting her ladyship, having had permission to see her in the detention-room at the prison. I trust you have good news for them, sir?"

Sexton Blake entered the hall, and eyed the old butler keenly.

"Look here, Jenkins," he said. "You know that I am not working with the police, but am striving to prove her ladyship's innocence. It is possible that you have kept back certain information, fearing, quite wrongly, that it may be to your mistress's detriment. Should this be so, I want you to tell me."

"Indeed not, sir," protested the old butler. "I know nothing. That is, sir—nothing of importance."

Blake laid a cajoling hand on the old servitor's arm.

"I want you to tell me all you know of the past lives of Lady Hartley and her husband," he said. "You have been with them many years. What do you know? You may speak quite safely to me."

"Only, sir, that when the poor dead master, Sir Edward, came back from India, and brought back her ladyship as his pretty young bride—an' one of the loveliest she was, Mr. Blake—he seemed different from what he used to be, sir. Of course, she was not my lady then; it was not for some years that Sir Edward inherited the baronetcy. They were plain Mr. and Mrs. Hartley then."

"In what way was Mr. Hartley different?" demanded Blake, a gleam of interest in his grey eyes. "You had known the late Sir Edward from his boyhood?"

"Yes, sir. I was his father's valet before I became servant to the son."

"Tell me," urged the detective, "in what way Sir Edward became different."

"Well, sir. If it isn't wrong—"

"It is quite right for you to give me all the information you can, Jenkins."

"Well, sir, he never went near any Christian church for three years, not until Miss Lillah was born. And he and Mrs. Hartley—her ladyship now—refused to have the minister near the house. That seemed very strange to me, who was then valet to Mr. Hartley, as parson and he were the best of friends before he went to India. The maid that was attending her ladyship at the time told me she heard her ladyship saying prayers in a foreign tongue, and singing queer, foreign songs at the piano, too. It did occur to me, sir, seeing that it was a black man that was murdered, that—that—"

The old man broke off in embarrassed confusion.

"That there might be some past acquaintance between the black man and her ladyship," Blake said. "Don't worry, Jenkins. You have done nothing to harm Lady Hartley by telling me this. On the other hand, you have helped me a little. You never saw the man until he was found here dead?"

"No, Mr. Blake, never. Nor did I ever hear her ladyship speak of him."

"Thank you, Jenkins! Now conduct me to the morning-room."

Relieved that his ordeal was over, Jenkins conducted the detective to the room. As Blake entered, Jim Currier and his fiancée hurried forward to greet him.

"Glad to see you, Blake!" Jim said, clasping the detective's hand. "Dare we hope that you have brought us good news? This suspense is awful!"

"I'm afraid I have no relief for you yet, Jim," Blake said gravely. "Tinker may have met with better success, for he is out shadowing a certain man I wish to lay by the heels. I

hear that you were granted an interview with your mother this morning, Miss Hartley. Has she volunteered any information?"

"None at all, Mr. Blake," Lillah said sadly. "She was worried because I had brokered off my engagement to Jim, and she earnestly pleaded with me not to do it. At first I refused, because it does not seem fair that Jim should marry me while this terrible suspicion hangs over my mother."

"Nonsense, darling!" put in Jim. "You are innocent, whatever this mystery may mean."

"She did not wish the engagement to be broken off?" mused Sexton Blake.

"It upset her greatly," said the girl, in low tones. "She—she muttered something about her sacrifice being in vain if I gave up Jim, and pleaded with me so hard that I consented to renew my engagement."

Blake's eyes filled with interest.

"She did not say what that 'sacrifice' was?" he asked thoughtfully.

"She would not answer any questions at all, Mr. Blake," Lillah said sadly. "And when I told her you were trying to clear her name, she seemed greatly agitated. She seemed not to wish you to interfere."

Blake looked compassionately at the girl as she clasped her hands in despair. She looked pathetically frail. The radiant happiness of a short week ago had gone, leaving her sad face cameo-like in its creamy whiteness.

"You must not give way to despair, Miss Hartley," he said cheerfully. "Perhaps the future will be more rosy soon. I must go back to London now, for my task here is finished. If Tinker has any news for me, I will wire you at once."

"Thank you, Mr. Blake! You have given me renewed hope for the future, and if your reassurances are somewhat vague, I know that you must have good reasons."

"Indeed, I have. Until I can lay hands on the man Tinker is after, I dare say nothing more."

Lillah pressed his hand gratefully.

"I am sure, Mr. Blake, that my unhappy mother's attitude towards you is due to the fact that she fears you may reveal the secret referred to by the murdered man in his letter."

"You are probably right," Blake said. "I suppose, Miss Hartley, you have not the faintest idea what that secret is?"

"Not the faintest in the world," the girl said.

"Nor," chimed in Jim, with an ardent glance into the eyes of his sweetheart, "will we ever believe that the 'secret' in any way reflects upon Lillah's mother."

A little later Blake took his departure. Dusk was falling when he entered his rooms at Baker Street that night, after an uneventful drive to town.

He was uneasily surprised at finding Tinker absent, for the lad should have been back an hour or so ago. After searching fruitlessly for a message, he rang for the housekeeper.

"Hasn't Tinker returned yet?" he asked. Mrs. Bardell answered his summons.

"No, sir. I got 'is tea ready too, thinking he'd be here. He went off early, dressed like a rough sailor lad, sayin' he'd be back at five o'clock, which it's now near eight. -- 'op's there's nothin' appened to the lad, sir --"

"Thank you, Mrs. Bardell! You may go now."

Blake spoke kindly, in spite of his worry. He knew that, bicker though they might, the motherly old heart of Mrs. Bardell held a very warm spot for Tinker.

As the landlady left the room Blake crossed to the 'phone, and asked to be put through to New Scotland Yard. His lips were tightly compressed, and his restless fingers drummed an impatient tattoo on the 'phone-box, as he waited for the call to be answered.

"Hullo! Hullo! Is that the Yard? Switon me through to Chief Inspector Rollings. Hullo. That you, Rollings? Blake speaking. I'm anxious about Tinker. I sent the boy down the East End this afternoon, and he has not returned yet. I was wondering if he rang you up at all. I told him to do so if -- What? He hasn't! I say, old man, I don't like this! I must get Pedro on his track at once. What's that? You'll come to? I shall be tremendously glad if you will. Hurry round at once. I'll wait."

Blake replaced the receiver, and sank into his chair. He was beginning to fear that ill had befallen his young assistant. There was an understanding between them that when they worked separately, and to a timed programme, all delays should be explained immediately in order to allay anxiety.

There were many in the under-world of London who cherished a very earnest desire to be "paid" to the account of Sexton Blake and his clever young assistant, and Dass, too, had proved himself a desperate and unscrupulous man, who would not stop at murder in his safety was threatened.

Inaction becoming unbearable, Blake rose, and, calling Pedro to heel, affixed a leash, then restlessly paced the floor.

Finally, the purring of a taxi floated up from the street, and a thunderous rat-tat sounder on the knocker. Recognising the official knock as being that of Rollings, Blake hurried down the stairs, closely followed by Pedro.

Rollings was settling with the taxi-driver, but Blake checked him.

"We will keep the cab for a time, Rollings," he said. "It will be less conspicuous than a car." He turned to the driver. "Get us to the Blue Anchor public-house, in the East India Dock Road, as soon as possible. This gentleman is a police-officer, so don't worry about the speed-limit!"

They seated themselves in the cab, and were soon bowling towards the East End.

"How on earth did you manage to pick up Dass's trail, and what makes you so anxious about the lad?" Rollings asked.

"Sorry, Rollings! I forgot you were in the dark. On the back of Dass's passport was the

address of the Lotus Flower cafe. You know the place--lies in Palm Tree Grove. Thinking that Dass had probably scribbled down his address as being a safe hiding-place, I sent Tinker there, in disguise. Tinker and I, as you know, always notify each other as to our movements. I have heard nothing from him, and that makes me strongly suspect that he is being forcibly detained. Pedro will easily get on his trail, providing the lad kept on foot, as I warned him to do. My only fear is that we may be too late. Dass does not use the velvet glove."

The steady voice and impassive face betrayed no sign, yet Rollings knew what lay beneath that placid exterior—a deep heartache and anxiety verging upon torture. Blake loved the brave youngster as a son.

"The Lotus Flower is a pretty hot shop," Blake, Rollings said quietly. "How are you going to get on the lad's trail? I thought you told the cabbie to take us to the Blue Anchor. Why not the Lotus Flower?"

"Tinker and I always start from the Blue Anchor when out upon East End expeditions. When one of us is unduly absent, and it looks like trouble, the other brings the bloodhound down to the Blue Anchor. From there the dog can usually pick up the trail."

Rollings looked a little blank.

"But surely you don't go barefooted, Blake? Even a bloodhound can't pick up a scent from a trail left by one pair of boots over-trod by probably scores of other boots! Pedro is clever, I know, on the stunt—but that's not possible."

"No, a little aniseed rubbed into the soles of the boots makes the trail very easy for Pedro to follow. A dog, as you know, Rollings will follow the scent of aniseed anywhere. Here we are!"

The taxi halted beneath the flaring arc-lights of the Blue Anchor, a gaudily-decorated gin-palace of the usual East End type. Blake dismissed the cab and led Pedro to the pavement facing the four-ale bar.

The usual London crowd that seems to instantaneously collect from nowhere in particular gathered round, but Rollings beckoned to a constable who stood on point duty at the corner, and, after saluting, the man moved the speculating groups on.

Blake took out a handkerchief faintly scented with aniseed, and Pedro sniffed at it eagerly. Dropping his flews to the ground the dog whimpered softly.

"Seek, boy, seek," Blake urged softly. "Find Tinker!"

The intelligent, dark eyes were raised to his master's face with a look of understanding. Then with a deep "woof--woof!" Pedro strained at the leash and started off along the East India Dock Road.

The East End was beginning to awaken to its somewhat questionable night life. The streets were thronged with a gay cosmopolitan crowd, and from the restaurants and garish gin-palaces, with their hissing flares, came maudlin snatches of song. Women, clothed in tawdry finery,

walked unashamed at the side of their Eastern cavaliers. Coloured raiments of the East provided splashes of colour amongst the more sober garments of the City, and on all sides was heard the excited jabber of alien tongues.

Pedro crossed the road and, turning abruptly to the left, entered the comparatively quieter purlieus of Palm Tree Grove. At the door of the Lotus Flower he halted, sniffed about, then made for the main road again.

"That proves conclusively that Tinker entered the cafe, and left it safely," Blake said. "Pedro went to the door, lost the in-going scent, but picked up the out-coming one."

"I see, Blake. Jove! That's a wonderful dog of yours, old man!"

"Hullo! He's making for the main gates of the docks," Blake said sharply. "Possibly Tinker heard at the Lotus Flower that Dass had been successful in signing on as one of the crew of some tramp bound for India, and came down here to seek him out. I suspected that Dass would choose this way of escaping."

A Customs official barred further progress.

"Excuse me, sir. After hours, you know. Have you a permit?" he said.

"I am Detective-Inspector Rollings, New Scotland Yard," said that individual, exposing his badge.

"Sorry, sir. I didn't recognise you, it being so dark. Can I help you in any way?"

"Has a boat of any description left for India to-day," Blake asked.

"Yes, sir. The tramp Sea Spray left the fairway at three prompt this evening. First stop Port Said."

Blake clenched his teeth with annoyance; possibly Dass had escaped him aboard this boat after all. But what had Tinker been doing, after trailing the man from the Lotus Flower to the docks, to let Dass slip through?

"Come, Rollings!" he said sharply, as Pedro once more resumed the trail. "We must see where Tinker went, after tracking his man here."

When they reached nine berth, the dog walked to and fro, then set off round the docks. Blake knew why, at the end of half an hour, Pedro, retracing his steps, came to the jetty; then the hound started off in quite another direction.

"Tinker evidently went searching around—probably while waiting for someone," he said, chafing at the delay. "I think we are on the final trail now."

Down through the maze of docks the dog led them.

After a mile had been travelled, Pedro leapt forward, jerking the leash from Blake's hand. With a deep-throated bay of anger the dog flung himself at the stout door of a shed which loomed faintly ahead in the gloom. Then a savage yelp of victory rang through the night, heavy with the reek of the docks.

And Blake understood.

"By heavens, Rollings, the boy is here!" he cried furiously. "The dog has found him. Tinker is here—in a trap!"

CHAPTER 8.

In the Nick of Time—Blake Unravels the Skein—Off to India.

BLAKE and the inspector broke into a sharp run, and, reaching the door, flung themselves heavily against it, again and again.

"Hang it!" panted Rollings.

"It's no good that way, Rollings," Blake said. "Let me try my keys."

The inspector stood back, and Blake took a small bunch of skeleton keys from his pocket. At length his efforts were rewarded, and the rusty lock clicked sharply. Flinging the door open, the private detective stood on the threshold, sweeping a beam of yellow light from his torch round the ebony-black interior.

A cry of fear and rage broke from his lips as the light came to rest upon the inert figure of a youth, cruelly bound and half-strangled, bleeding from the cruel fangs of the rats that scuttled squeaking to their holes.

"Good heavens! The lad is choking, Rollings!" gasped Sexton Blake. "The fiends! Look at the way he is tied!"

He raced to Tinker's side, and, inserting his fingers between the purple neck and cruel rope, quickly relieved the pressure. Tinker's eyes glared up at his master with a look of horror that changed slowly to a milder one of relief. Whipping out his knife, the detective severed the bonds that bit deeply into wrists and ankles; then he removed the filthy gag.

"Oh, thank Heaven, gov'nor!" Tinker gasped, his face ghastly. "Another hour and I should have been a goner." He shuddered. "The rats would have seen to that."

Sexton Blake's face grew dark as he looked at the boy's blood-stained face, and the clothing about the ankles, torn to shreds by the sharp, needle-like teeth of the rodents.

Dropping to one knee he pushed back the tattered trousers, and, taking a phial of strong antiseptic lotion from his pocket, anointed the small, red punctures in order to prevent septic poisoning.

When he had finished Tinker staggered to his feet, only to fall helplessly to his knees.

"Steady, young 'un," Rollings said gently. "Been in a rough house, Tinker, my son? Thank the stars we got you in time. You can thank old Pedro for this—that dog's worth diamonds."

He and Blake chafed the lad's legs in order to restore circulation. The pain was intense as the blood flowed back beneath the bruised and wealed skin. After half an hour's treatment Tinker found himself able to walk, and they set off slowly for the Customs House. Neither Blake nor Rollings questioned the lad yet, for Tinker was in no condition to reply to them. When they arrived Rollings left them in order to search for a taxi.

A Customs official, wearing the badge of the St. John's Ambulance Corps, came forward, and after examining the wound on the lad's head, cleansed and bandaged it.

"' Lucky for you it was a glancing blow, young 'un," Blake said, when the wound had been attended to. "What happened?"

Tinker then told his master of the treacherous fireman of the tramp, Sea Spray.

"Don't worry, lad," Blake said gently, as Tinker concluded his narrative, blaming himself for his failure bitterly. "It was a cunning trap that would have deceived almost anyone. The fireman was undoubtedly Dass himself. I thought I recognised his handiwork in the thug-like way in which he bound you. He wanted that half-hour he kept you hanging about in order to collect his pals. The scoundrel has slipped through our fingers again, but I will follow his trail from pole to pole rather than he shall escape the penalty of his villainy."

"Great Thump!" muttered Tinker. "Do you really think that nigger was Dass?"

"I am certain of it, my boy. It was unfortunate that you fell a victim to his duplicity and cunning. He got to know who you were—and so hoodwinked you."

"I was a blind fool, guv'nor!" Tinker said ruefully.

"Nonsense, dear lad. The man is as artful as he is unscrupulous. And the freemasonry amongst those Hindoos enabled him to lure you into the trap. You had too scant a description to recognise him—but here's Rollings!"

Inspector Rollings, mopping his face with a handkerchief, stumped into the room.

"I've found a taxi at last, Blake," he said.

"Phew! Like looking for a needle in a haystack in these parts." He turned to Tinker.

"Feel better, lad? We'd better get you home, for you've had a pretty rotten time of it by the look of things."

Tinker made a feeble attempt at a grin.

"All serene now, Mr. Rollings!" he said. "I shall feel better after a good sleep. I've got a big brass band playing jazzy in my napper. But never mind about me! What about Dass? The Sea Spray might possibly carry wireless, although only a tramp, and the skipper could be asked to clap Dass in irons and hand him over to the police at the first port they stop at."

Inspector Rollings looked dubious, and glanced at Blake with questioning eyes.

Blake shook his head and turned to the Customs official.

"Does the Sea Spray carry wireless?" he asked.

"No, sir! She doesn't belong to any official line, and is owned by her captain," the official said. "If you want the boat stopped, however, we could get a message through to the receiving station at Port Said, and the man you are after could be detained as soon as the vessel gets into port there. That should be in about twelve days' time, if they meet with good weather."

"I don't think that would benefit us at all, Rollings," Blake said, turning to the inspector. "It would be a serious step that the authorities would not consider unless stronger evidence of Dass's guilt could be given."

"You are right, Blake," Rollings said. "The chief would never give his authority, I'm afraid, unless the evidence against Dass was fairly conclusive. Only in the most authenticated cases can a man be detained abroad at the command of the British police."

"But look what the blessed nigger did to me," said Tinker warmly. "Even if we haven't evidence enough over the Larches business, there's this East End job against him now."

"My dear lad, you can only guess that it was Gunga Dass, and guessing isn't evidence. I might be able to satisfy the chief on the point, but he would not act, knowing it wouldn't be sufficient for the authorities abroad."

A grim smile hovered around Blake's lips. Efficient as Scotland Yard undoubtedly is, and ever alert, the red-tape of officialdom abroad, mentioned by Rollings, had enabled many a crook to evade arrest.

"We will get back to Baker Street, then," he said, helping Tinker towards the door. "I'll drop you in the Strand, Rollings. You can easily get another taxi from there, and it will put you half-way home."

When they arrived at the Strand Rollings left them, and Blake and his young assistant resumed their journey to Baker Street.

Mrs. Bardell met them in the hall, and as she caught sight of Tinker her worried expression changed swiftly to one of relief; then she uttered a little scream as she saw the bandages about the lad's forehead.

"Lawks a mussey, Master Tinker. What 'ave you bin a-doin' to yourself? I knowed some-thing 'ad 'appened. It's just like my poor Uncle Bill. He went out smiling an' 'appy in the mornin', but was brought 'ome in the hambulance afore night!"

"Don't talk so, Mrs. Bardell," said Blake, repressing a smile. "Busy yourself with preparing some beef-tea for the boy."

"Which is what I did for my Uncle Bill, an' in spite of it 'e died!"

"What a cheerful nurse!" grinned Tinker. "Guv'nor, I'd better make my will. I leave my pocket-knife to Pedro, and my new dog collar to Mrs. Bardell. Thus do I dispose of my estate."

The landlady-housekeeper hurried down to the kitchen and Blake helped the lad to his bedroom.

After Tinker had been made comfortable, Blake left him and went down to the consulting-room.

He half extinguished the lights and, taking off his coat and boots, changed into an old, faded, and stained dressing-gown, and slippers. Then, with furrowed brows, he dropped into his favourite arm-chair and reached for and filled a burnt and blackened briar absently.

A few minutes later the room was dense with clouds of smoke, up into which the celebrated criminologist stared dreamily as though in those wreathing coils of blue he were seeking for the elusive elucidation of the mystery. The march of events had disclosed much to him, but not the motive for the strange attitude and silence of Lillah's mother.

For hour after hour he sat. The room became thicker with smoke and the fire burnt slowly out, leaving the grate cold and cheerless. The first flush of dawn tinted the eastern sky with rosy fingers; the clattering of cans and the raucous shouts of milkmen came up from the street as the Metropolis awakened from slumber. But still the wizard of Baker street sat motionless, his logical brain unravelling the skein that was so tangled, thread by thread, reconstructing, analysing, sifting every shred of information he had gleaned.

The door opened and Mrs. Bardell, armed with dust-pan and broom, entered. She started violently, and the pan clattered to the floor as she saw the dim form of the detective through the haze of smoke.

"Lawks, sir! You did give me a start! Haven't you been to bed, sir?" she asked, her fat face reproachful.

Blake came back from his dream-world with a start.

"Why, how late—early, rather—it must be!" He glanced at the clock. "I had no idea I had sat so long. Still, a very profitable night—very profitable, indeed, Mrs. Bardell!" he said with a smile.

Mrs. Bardell sniffed.

"Then your ways ain't mine, sir. I think it's more profitable to be abed of a night, like a Christian. Nights is all right for howls an' sich creatures. All that terbacca hash and match-storks littered about the carpit, too," she said, with the candour of an old servant. "An' them curtains'll smell like a public-house 'til next laundry comes—and that ain't for a week."

Sexton Blake smiled indulgently.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Bardell! How's Master Tinker this morning?"

"The young rip desists on getting hup, sir, despite my demonstrations. I took him hup a nice basin of gruel first thing, but 'e told me ter give it to the dorg, an' bring 'im a peg! He'll be on 'is death-bed and riding in the hearse soon if he don't keep abed. He's just like poor Bardell. I remember once when 'e 'ad a quiney—"

But Blake had disappeared towards the bathroom. After a bath and a change of clothing he returned, looking as fresh as if he had just left his bed, to find Master Tinker seated in a businesslike attitude at the breakfast-table.

"Cheerio, guv'nor!" Tinker grinned, as his master entered. "I'm imagining the bacon is that pig, Daes, and attacking it ferociously!"

Blake smiled, for he knew the lad had an intense dislike of being coddled, and he had not the heart to send him back to bed. The boyish face was still slightly pale, but thanks to clean living and a healthy constitution, Tinker was almost himself again.

"What does this mean, Tinker?" Blake asked, with mock severity. "It looks like rank mutiny—"

"It means I'm unholly peckish, guv'nor!" Tinker said, unperturbed, as he lifted the cover from a second smoking dish of kidneys and

bacon. "Mrs. Bardell suggested gruel! Who told her I was a giddy convict? Help yourself, guv'nor—there's a bit of the rind left!"

With twinkling eyes Blake sat down.

"You're looking jolly pleased with yourself this morning, guv'nor!" Tinker said, eyeing his master curiously.

"I have good reason to be, my boy. I believe I have hit upon the motive for Lady Hartley's silence!"

Tinker's fork, loaded with a succulent kidney, stopped dead on its journey.

"You've done what, guv'nor!" he gasped.

Sexton Blake regarded his young assistant from amused eyes; then thoughtfully stirred his coltee.

"It has not been so very difficult," he said. "As you know, I have always suspected Lady Hartley to be—well, not English, my boy. I now believe her to be of Eastern blood. This is borne out by some interesting information I gleaned from Jenkins, the butler, yesterday. He told me that for three years after Edward Hartley returned from India with his bride neither he nor she attended any Christian place of worship. Not until their child, Lillah, was born, in fact. Also that the maid who was attending her ladyship at the time occasionally heard her mistress praying in a foreign tongue."

"Great Scott, guv'nor! It sounds as though she was a heathen!"

"Too harsh a word for the Parsee faith, my boy," he said quietly. "It has many noble features, and is one of the Eastern religions that practically border on Christianity."

"A—A Parsee, guv'nor?"

"Yes, my boy."

"What makes you think she is a Parsee?" asked Tinker, all ears.

"From her type of beauty chiefly, Tinker. She has the wonderful creamy skin of that race, and also the slightly Semitic cast of features. Besides, the Parsee race is one of the very few Eastern races that could successfully pose as British. Lady Hartley has been accepted as British, unsuspected, for twenty years."

"Then Miss Lillah must be an Eurasian—a half-caste, guv'nor!"

"Yes. And therein lies the secret of Lady Hartley's strange silence, I feel sure. The half-caste is, as you know, Tinker, despised by both East and West. They cannot even boast of pure 'nigger blood,' as Sir John terms it. Small wonder that Lady Hartley desires her secret to be unknown."

"Go on, sir," Tinker cried excitedly. "I'm beginning to get an inkling of the truth now. That is the 'secret' mentioned in the letter of Bhur Singh?"

Blake nodded.

"Jim and Miss Lillah Hartley had permission to visit Lady Hartley at the prison detention-room yesterday. On account of the cloud of suspicion that hangs over her mother, the girl broke off the engagement, in spite of the boy's protestations. When Lady Hartley heard of this she was so upset that she forgot caution."

and told the girl that if she gave Jim up her sacrifice would have been in vain."

"Sacrifice, gov'nor? That sounds an admission that she is innocent, as we have always thought. And that she is wilfully letting the world believe her guilty."

"Exactly, Tinker," agreed Blake. "And this is my idea of the motive for the sacrifice. If Lady Hartley had protested her innocence, and if she had revealed all she knew concerning Bhur Singh, the most stringent investigations would have been made and her secret unearthed. That would have been fatal to Lillah's future happiness. Sir John is intensely bitter against 'nigger blood,' and would never allow Jim to marry the half-caste girl should the truth become known to him. Besides that, Miss Hartley would never be socially accepted. Her whole life would be ruined. Rather than destroy her daughter's happiness Lady Hartley is prepared to sacrifice her liberty, and perhaps life."

Tinker gulped at something that rose uncomfortably in his throat.

"But—a Parsee isn't a nigger, gov'nor—"

"In the sight of Sir John Currier, it is 'nigger blood.' Lillah would be to him even more 'nigger' than an American octaroon. Of course it is absurd—but then, the prejudice is there—and Lady Hartley saw in it the ruin of her child should the truth of her Parsee origin become known."

A knock sounded at the street door, and soon Mrs. Bardell lumbered up the stairs. In response to Blake's request she entered and handed him a strip of pasteboard.

"Gentleman to see you, sir!"

Blake flashed a warning glance at Tinker.

"It's Jim Currier, young 'un," he said quietly. "For the present we will keep our deductions a secret."

Tinker nodded understandingly.

"Show the gentleman up at once, Mrs. Bardell. Also prepare another breakfast. It is early, and I expect my friend was in too much of a hurry to get here to have stopped for refreshment."

The landlady left them, and the door soon opened to admit Jim Currier. The young man's face was gaunt and haggard with the strain of the past week, his eyes deeply shadowed.

"Morning, Blake!" he said, with an attempt at a smile. "Hallo, Tinker! What on earth has happened? Why the bandage?"

Blake told the young man of all that had transpired the previous evening. Jim's face grew considerably longer.

"Then the search will have to begin all over again, Blake," he said despairingly. "Will the rotten affair ever be cleared up? I hoped to hear that you had been successful. That is why I came over so early—so that I could hurry back to Lillah with the good news! What am I to say to her now? Is there no way in which you can resume the trail of this man Dass?"

"There is one way, Jim," Blake said quietly;

"by going to India on a faster boat—a mail-packet for preference. I could reach Bombay before the Sea Spray, and thus intercept Dass when he leaves the ship."

Jim's face became more hopeful.

"You'll do it, Blake?" he pleaded. "It's a big undertaking, I know. Yet upon your decision rests our happiness. Lillah is making herself ill with suspense and worry. I will meet every expense, old man."

"I have given my word to carry the case through, and I would follow Dass to the ends of the earth rather than the scamp should escape punishment. Twice he has brutally tried to murder Tinker, and an innocent woman is suffering a cruel suspicion. The question of fees is immaterial, for, luckily, the day is passed when I was compelled to place a financial value upon my time." He turned to Tinker. "Get a call through to the head offices of the P. and O. line, young 'un," he said.

"Heaven bless you, Blake," the young man said unsteadily. "You are indeed a friend!"

Mrs. Bardell entered with a tray containing Jim's breakfast.

"Sit down, Jim, and eat this," Blake said. "You did not stop to eat before you started out, I expect?"

"Hold the line a minute!" Tinker shouted. He turned to his master. "Here you are, gov'nor, I've got them!"

Blake rose and crossed to the 'phone.

"Hullo! Is that Postal and Oriental H. Q.? That you, Sinclair? Sexton Blake of Baker Street speaking. Oh, pretty fit, thanks, old man! I want you to do me a favour. Passages are all booked up now, I know, but a matter of extreme urgency—life or death, in fact—compels me to get to Bombay without delay. Will you reserve two passages on the next mail-packet? You will? Thanks, old man! What's that? The s.s. Orient leaves Tilbury to-morrow morning at eleven? Good! When will she arrive? Nineteen days! That will do excellently. Good-bye, old man!"

Replacing the receiver, he walked back to the breakfast-table.

"The curtain falls upon this drama in the Western 'world,' he said quietly "To-morrow, Tinker, you and I sail for the East."

"And," said Jim fervently, "for the sake of the little girl whose happiness means more to me than all the world, may Providence watch over you both, and guide you to success!"

CHAPTER 9.

Bombay—A Dangerous Disguise—Blake's Mistake—in Deadly Peril

CLANG! Clang!

The gong upon the poop of the s.s. Orient was ringing out its welcome message to passengers and crew. To a man and boy, who had been earliest on deck that morning, its note was especially welcome.

"Hallo, guv'nor—two bells! That means land to starboard! Three cheers! Blessed if I can see it, though," added Tinker, peering ahead. "Those look-outs must have eyes like cats!"

"It will probably be Bombay, young 'un," rejoined Sexton Blake. "If you look carefully over the starboard bow you will, in a little while, faintly discern the harbour approach."

The mists of early morning shrouded the Indian Ocean, but as the sun rose higher the silvery haze was drawn up like a curtain, and the powerful rays were reflected in golden gleams upon the blue waters. Hovering around the great liner could be seen the glistening white wings of seagulls—now dipping towards the ocean, now circling into the blue ether.

Half an hour passed, and now, across the bay, stately buildings of white stone contrasted with the gorgeous panorama of purple coast-line to which distance and uncertain light lent fantastic shapes. Craft of every description, from liners to dhows, dotted the bay and docks of the great Indian port, while trees of emerald green, intersected by houses of pink, white, and blue, fringed the white surf.

A range of mauve-tinted hills, wrapped in the haze of distance, formed a superb background.

"A superbly beautiful scene, my boy," the detective said, as he bit the end from a cigar. "It is, guv'nor. A pity the East don't smell as nice as it looks, though!"

Tinker sniffed the air.

Sexton Blake and his young assistant were slowly pacing the port side of the saloon deck, where a gaily-coloured awning afforded shelter from the increasingly powerful rays of the morning sun.

"Well, guv'nor! We're here at last. What's the first item on the programme? We passed the Sea Spray in the Red Sea, half-way between Suez and Aden, and I suppose from that we shall have to cool our heels for a few days?"

Sexton Blake nodded.

"About nine days, roughly, young 'un. I can get the correct time from the Bombay Customs. As soon as Dass leaves the boat we will follow him. It is possible that he will seek lodgings in the town for the night, before proceeding to the Temple to restore the Eye of Kali to the priests, and seek his reward. If so, his lodgings would be the best place at which to arrest him, since we cannot claim police protection, and should have a swarm of natives round us if we tried to collar the man in the open street."

"You're right, guv'nor! Bombay is full of thugs as a mole is full of fleas. We should be attacked in a jiffy if they thought we were after one of their own kidney. I suppose we shall be in disguise, in any case?"

Sexton Blake puffed thoughtfully at his cigar.

"Yes! These are my plans, Tinker. I shall assume the role of a priest of Kali. You will be my bearer. After we have shadowed Dass to his lodgings, I will interview him as being an emissary from the Temple. By doing that I hope to obtain some useful information. Then I will reveal to him who I am, arrest him, and terrify the fellow into confessing the truth

before an Indian Commissioner. If we can only find the ruby on him, he will see that we have him tight."

"I see, guv'nor! Sort of third degree stunt. It's a jolly good wheeze, too. As soon as we have the confession, all will be plane sailing. We can take Dass back to England with us, and Lady Hartley will be acquitted. Hallo, we're slowing down!"

"All deck hands for'ard! Get ready with the port anchor!" boomed a stentorian voice from the bridge.

The bo'sun, followed by the mate and the deck crew, hurried up the gangway to the poop deck. The steam winches hissed and clanged, and the anchor-chain rattled noisily in the hawser-pipe. A gentle tremor shook the vessel as she drifted gracefully to her moorings.

The quayside was thronged with picturesque, chattering natives, rickshaws, and gaily-decorated gharries. A group of half-caste officials swaggered up the gangways and subjected passports and luggage to a careful examination. At length, the passengers, consisting for the most part of military and Civil Servants returning from leave, were free to leave the ship. Chartering a gharry, Blake instructed the driver to convey them to the Regina Hotel.

Although by no means strangers to India's hub of commerce, the two detectives gazed about them with interest as the gharry trotted at a smart pace along the sweeping boulevards. The pavements, a brilliant kaleidoscope of colour, were thronged with fiercely-moustached Pathans, military Sikhs, shaven-headed Tamils, Rajputs, Mahomedans, and an occasional creamy-skinned Parsee.

Stately buildings flanked the stone pavements, and well-organised street cars, covered with gaily-coloured awnings, ran silently and efficiently at regular intervals. Native police, clad in gaudy uniforms of blue and yellow, swaggered along the footwalks; and the air was heavy with the stagnant odours for which Bombay is especially notorious.

"Here we are, guv'nor! I bet old Marahza will be thumpin' glad to see us again!"

The gharry halted beneath the imposing facade of the Regina Hotel. A swarm of coolies rushed out, jabbering excitedly as to who should carry in the luggage. The discussion, which had every appearance of ending in a free fight, was definitely settled by Tinker, who carried in their trunk himself, leaving the niggers to a heated argument which would probably last for the next hour.

They entered the hotel, and a Hindoo, irreproachably dressed in European clothes, hurried forward, his brown, intelligent face beaming with pleasure.

"Blake sahib! This is indeed a pleasure. It is some time since my hotel was honoured by your august presence, and that of the chota-sahib, Tinker."

Sexton Blake smiled as he gripped the hotel manager's hand heartily.

"I am not here for long, Marahza," he said.

"A fortnight at the latest. I came to you because I desire your help."

The Hindoo looked cautiously round, but the foyer was deserted.

"I shall be pleased, Blake sahib, to assist you in any way I can. I cannot forget the great debt of gratitude I owe you for so speedily tracing the perpetrator of the mysterious thefts at my hotel during your last visit. But come to my office, for there we can talk with greater safety."

They followed the manager to his private sanctum, and sat beneath the cooling breeze circulated by an electric fan.

"I require your help in this way, Marahza," Blake said. "The case that brings me to your country necessitates the use of a disguise that would be very difficult for a European to obtain—difficult even for you. I want the full robes and regalia of a High Priest of the Goddess Kali."

The dark, expressive eyes of Marahza looked troubled.

"Are you aware of the penalty which would be exacted should your disguise be detected?" he asked gravely. "The millions who worship at Kali's shrine no greater affront could be offered. You are a Christian, and such an act as you contemplate would appear to them as a desecration. I, too, am of the Hindoo faith—a worshipper of the Mother Goddess. What you ask is impossible, Blake sahib!"

"And what if your help should result in the long-lost Eye of your goddess being restored to the temple?" Blake asked quietly.

The Hindoo started violently and glared at Blake from amazed eyes.

"The Kali ruby!" he whispered fearfully, his eyes now illumined with a fanatical light. "What—what do you know of the sacred Eye of our goddess, Blake sahib? It is twenty years since treacherous hands plundered and desecrated her illustrious shrine. Since then the shadow of evil has fallen upon us, for Kali is blind and can no longer see the evil wrought by Yama, the devil god!"

The detective told the Hindoo of all that had occurred in England, and of his suspicions concerning Gunga Dass.

"I am amazed, bewildered," Marahza said, when the detective had concluded his narrative. "Bhur Singh was known to all who are of the Hindoo faith. He was a high priest of our caste, and keeper of the temple jewels at Khan Dar. Should your suspicions of Dass, the son of darkness, become known, it would fare badly with him, for the vengeance of Kali's priests would swiftly descend upon his thrice-cursed head."

Blake smiled.

"And for that reason I ask you to keep what I have told you a secret for a time," he said quickly. "Whatever fate may befall Dass, he richly deserves it; but should vengeance fall upon him before I have time to obtain his confession, my mission would fail."

Marahza's dark eyes flamed with quick understanding.

"I will help you all I can, Blake sahib. I am satisfied that your desire to assume the role of a high priest of our goddess is honourable."

"Thank you, Marahza!" Blake said. "Singh, you say, was keeper of the jewels at the temple of Khan Dar. What is the approximate value of those jewels?"

"They are of almost incalculable value, Blake sahib. The priceless treasures of ancient India adorn the shrines of our gods. But why should the dog, Dass, having stolen the jewels, have returned with it to India, where he could never dispose of it, and where its possession by him would endanger his life?"

Sexton Blake smiled grimly and turned to his young assistant.

"Then Dass played for high stakes, young 'un," he said.

"What do you mean, gov'nor?"

The detective turned to the Hindoo.

"Would not Dass become a priest of Kali, as a reward for returning the jewel?" he asked.

"It is more than possible, Blake sahib. He might even have been made keeper of the jewels—as was his master, Singh. Do you suspect that he meant to restore the Eye to the Temple?"

"I do," Blake replied. "And for a time the scoundrel's intentions puzzled me. Now the object of them is clear. He murdered Bhur



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NOW ON SALE.

Singh for the ruby so that he might restore it to the temple himself, and take Bhur Singh's position as his reward. Once in possession of the keys of the treasure chamber, it would not have been long before friend Dass would have made a clean sweep of the lot!"

Tinker whistled softly.

"Phew, guv'nor! I never thought of that! I wondered why such a dirty rotter—as Dass has proved himself to be—was so apparently honest as to return here with the ruby. He is no mug, and could have slipped over to Amsterdam and had the ruby cut into two stones of different shapes. The value would have been lessened, of course, but he would have met with little difficulty in disposing of them that way."

The Hindoo stared at Blake from aghast eyes.

"Cut—cut the sacred Eye of Kali into two parts!" he almost shouted.

"I fancy that would have been its ultimate fate had not Dass been possessed of nerve and ambition," Blake said. "But we will leave the matter as it stands at present, for we have over a week in which to perfect our plans. Tinker, I know is hungry—as he generally is—and would like to sample a repetition of those excellent chota-hazris you used to prepare for us when we were last in Bombay."

"Hurray, guv'nor! Action at last! The Customs have just told me that the Sea Spray is due at the docks at seven this evening," Tinker cried excitedly, bursting unceremoniously into the detective's bed-room. "Now we sha'n't be long!"

Sexton Blake, his eyes filled with satisfaction, rose from a bamboo couch, on which he had been enjoying a drowsy siesta during the intense heat of the afternoon sun.

"Then we must get busy, young 'un," he said briskly. "Fetch the walnut juice and make-up box from the shelf yonder. I will start on you first."

Tinker's face fell.

"Why wasn't I born a giddy Hottentot?" he groaned. "That beastly stuff won't wash off for weeks. Can't I go as a Parsee, or a Eurasian?"

Sexton Blake chuckled.

"You're going as a Syce, young 'un," he said, with twinkling eyes. "That's the blackest of the lot, you know!"

With a wry face Tinker crossed to the shelf and fetched the articles of disguise. Under Blake's skilful hands the pink, boyish face changed rapidly to the copper-coloured hue of a Hindoo. Soft wax, skilfully moulded, lent an aquiline effect to the snub nose, and also heightened the cheek bones. A particular preparation, dropped carefully into the blue eyes, enlarged the pupils to such an extent as to make them passably black, and a wispy moustache, drooping slightly at the corners, proved effective in adding a few years to the youthful detective's appearance.

"There you are, young 'un," Blake said, with a smile. "Your legs and arms you can do your-

self. Don't go away when you have finished, for I sha'n't be able to find you again very easily if you happen to get mixed up with that crowd of coolies downstairs!"

Tinker grinned, and his even, white teeth glistened like pearls as they contrasted with his dusky skin.

"Is it ever going to come off, guv'nor?"

"Not for many months, young 'un," Blake said, his twinkling eyes giving the lie to the gravity in his voice. "In a hot climate like this the pores are open, and most of the stuff will work itself beneath the skin. I will do my best for you, though. Perhaps, by a long and somewhat painful treatment, it will be possible to restore the outer epidermis to its natural hue. But I don't know that I shall trouble, as I consider you greatly improved in appearance."

"I say, guv'nor! No coddling, now!"

Blake laughed heartily.

"You'll soon be a pink-faced little cherub again, young 'un. A little alkali will soon get rid of it." He chuckled at Tinker's note of alarm.

Tinker grunted, and dabbed the stain on his legs and arms more freely. The task finished to his satisfaction, he twisted a cotton dhoti about his legs in the Hindoo fashion, and slipped into a white muslin shirt. A plain pugaree wound about his head completed the transformation.

"How's that, young 'un?"

Tinker turned to his master, and a gasp of surprise broke from his lips. He had been so busy with the details of his own disguise that he had not been noticing Blake.

"Jimmy! Is that really you, guv'nor?"

Before him stood a dignified, aged man, clothed in the magnificent regalia of a High Priest of Kali. A pair of dark eyes, seeming to burn with a strange fire, peered from beneath shaggy brows. A network of faintly discernible lines beneath the eyes gave the dauntless face an appearance of age and venerability, while a flowing white beard lent to the features a patriarchal distinction.

A skirt of white satin, richly embroidered with gold thread in fantastic designs, was half covered by a white silk surcoat of equally magnificent texture and design, which was gathered to the waist by a jewelled girdle. A white turban, ornamented by a large badge of filigree gold, crowned the white hair, and on the dusky brow was the red-painted caste-mark of a High Priest of Kali.

"You've got Matheson Lang and Martin Harvey beaten to a frazzle, guv'nor!" Tinker said admiringly.

"Oh, it's pretty good, young 'un," Blake said, in his quiet way, strapping a pair of leather sandals to his feet. "You will find some alum in my bag. Make up a strong solution, and thoroughly soak your feet in it to harden them. You would not be able to walk in wooden sandals, and leather ones being out of the question, I'm afraid you'll have to go barefooted."

Tinker grunted, but, recognising the soundness of the advice, obeyed.

"Anything else, guv'nor?" he asked in resigned tones, as he sat soaking his feet in the solution. "I suppose I've got to walk at a respectful distance behind you? You know the old saying—'After the Lord Mayor's Show follows the dustcart!'"

"It will help to improve your manners, Tinker, to accept a humble position," Blake said, in tones of mock severity. "You have been getting a bit too big for your—sandals lately. Mrs. Bardell will be quite pleased with the reformation.

Tinker chuckled.

"Better tell me what to do, guv'nor," he said.

"You will walk about a yard to the rear, and when I sit down you must get busy with the fan. Squat by my side, and say nothing, for your Urdu has a weird pronunciation of its own. You will act the deaf and dumb mute. If you wish to let me know anything of importance during the interview with Dass, use the fan unobtrusively as a morse flag. Is all clear?"

"All serene, sir!"

After carefully scrutinising each other's disguises, they made their way to the street. A string of gharries were drawn up outside the facade, and with a profound salaam the driver of the nearest one opened the door for the supposed priest and his servant to enter.

"To the Alexandra Docks," Blake commanded haughtily, in the soft Sanskrit tongue, the only language spoken by the priests of the Hindoo faith.

The gharry-wallah prostrated himself upon the pavement, then sprang to his seat and whipped the horse into a smart trot.

Dusk was beginning to fall; a thousand twinkling electric-lights sprang up along the boulevards. Sun-worshippers knelt upon their praying-rugs, their faces turned towards the Eastern sky, salaaming and chanting reverently. Coloured lanterns of fantastic hues decorated the balconies of the houses, and bursts of bizarre music came from the cafes of Bombay.

Finally the gharry halted outside the main entrance of the docks, and Blake and his assistant walked with impressive dignity to the quayside. A light flashed repeatedly from the bridge of a vessel that was indiscernible owing to the white mist that shrouded the bay.

"There is a vessel out in the bay, calling up in the morse code, young 'un," Blake said. "Spell the message out carefully when she begins to send."

A light flashed six times in succession from the roof of the Customs, to let the vessel in the bay know that her calling-up signal had been seen. Almost immediately the signal lamp on the ship's bridge flashed its message.

"Did you get it, young 'un?"

"Yes, guv'nor," whispered Tinker. "It read: 'S.S. Sea Spray, bound for Bombay and Karatchi. What berth?'"

The answer was flashed immediately from the Customs.

"Number four berth, port side, wasn't it Tinker?"

"Yes, guv'nor. Shall we get round there! There won't be much time to lose, for you know the rule in the merchant service—as soon as fires are drawn all stokers are free to go ashore."

Number four berth proved to be a good half-mile down the docks, and when they arrived the Sea Spray was already roped to her mooring-posts. The tramp looked more filthy and defected than ever, for the blazing heat of the Red Sea had blistered her paintwork in huge broken patches.

A dilapidated gangway was slid out, and one by one her crew came ashore.

"There's Dass, guv'nor!" Tinker whispered excitedly. "That big, good-tempered-looking chap in the rear."

Sexton Blake regarded Dass with interest. The man's garments were tattered and filthy, yet he walked with an air of jauntness that seemed incongruous in comparison with his vagabond appearance. In the soft, dark eyes still lurked that pleasant hint of a roguish smile that had so completely disarmed Tinker.

Dass stepped on the jetty, and, leaving his companions, made for a string of gharries that were drawn up beneath the flaring arc-lights of the main quay. Blake followed cautiously. When Dass had given instructions to his driver, and the gharry was moving off, he entered the one immediately behind.

"Follow that gharry in front," he said to the driver. "When it pulls up, drive two hundred yards ahead, then stop."

The gharry-wallah, after salaaming deeply before the supposed priest, obeyed.

The docks were soon left behind. The chase led through a maze of native quarters. Finally they enter Grant Road, the Whitechapel of Bombay.

Dass's gharry halted, and after about two hundred yards had been traversed Blake rapped gently on the hood. Peering through the small window at the rear of the cab, the detective saw Dass pay his gharry-wallah, then cross the road and enter what appeared to be a cheap native cafe.

Motioning to Tinker to follow him, he got out of the gharry, and, after paying the driver, walked opposite the cafe in order to take a better view.

The interior was crowded with chattering, eating natives, and was feebly lighted by flickering kerosene lamps. A fire, its ruddy glow reflected from brass lotahs and cooking-pots, burned in a primitive range, while upon a roughly constructed platform a native woman danced wildly to a blatant tune evolved from the rolling beat of tom-toms and thrumming of stringed instruments. An overpowering smell of curried fish struggled for supremacy with the reek of cheap Indian spirits and bad drainage.

"Cheeful sort of hole, guv'nor!" whispered

Tinker. "But look at Dass! Seems as though he's got plenty of pals here!"

Dass was being warmly greeted by a good dozen of his caste. After drinking with them for a few minutes at the rude bar, he left them and entered into conversation with a greasy-skinned Hindoo who appeared to be the proprietor. Some coins changed hands, and the proprietor led Dass through a door at the far end of the cafe. After a few minutes had elapsed the proprietor returned.

"Dass has evidently booked a room, young 'un!" whispered Blake. "We will enter the cafe now. Don't forget your part, my boy, for half of those Hindoos yonder are true thugs, and we should be in a tight corner should our disguise be penetrated."

They crossed the narrow street. On the threshold of the cafe Blake paused, his eyes sweeping over the evil-looking crowd with a glance of haughty scorn. He made an impressive figure in his priestly robes, and the hum of conversation respectfully ceased. With slow, dignified mien the detective entered, and all eyes became riveted upon the supposed priest of Kali. To a man the motley collection rose and reverently salaamed, for, thugs and cut-throats as they undoubtedly were, religion to them was dearer than life.

The proprietor hurried forward, his fat, repulsive features bathed in a sweat of fear.

"Salaam, Dhermer Rajah—salaam!" he muttered fervently, prostrating himself to the ground.

Blake spurned him contemptuously with his sandalled foot.

"Rise, thou son of mud!" he said haughtily. "I bid thee conduct me to the presence of one Gunga Dass, whom I believe to be sheltering beneath thy evil roof."

The Hindoo reverently kissed the hem of the priestly robes and rose to his feet.

"Thy wish is law, great one," he said humbly.

He led them through a door that opened into a long, dimly-lit passage, flanked on either side by doorless, cell-like rooms. Finally he halted before the entrance to one situated at the far end of the corridor, overlooking a narrow side street.

Lying full-length upon a reed mat was Gunga Dass, but as Blake entered he sprang to his feet and salaamed.

"Salaam, Dhermer Rajah!" he said in reverent tones. "What is thy desire?"

Blake motioned the proprietor to depart, and the man hurried from the room. The detective then seated himself upon a rudely constructed bamboo chair, and Tinker, squatting at his side, vigorously fanned his master's face.

"Dass, where is thy master, Singh—and hast thou been successful, thou and he, in securing the Eye of our Goddess?"

Dass started violently.

"Sahib Singh is dead, great one," he said quickly. "But who art thou? Thou art not of the Temple of Khan Dur?"

"Nay; I come from the Temple of Mahana,

on the banks of Mother Ganges. But the priests of Khan Dur appointed me Keeper of the Jewels at thy temple during thy master's absence. Speak freely, I command thee, for I am an emissary from thy Head Priest."

Suspicion slowly faded from the dark eyes of Dass, to be replaced by a cunningly assumed expression of pious sorrow.

"Singh sahib, my beloved master, was slain by the Parsee's daughter," he said sadly. "With his last breath he entrusted the ruby of our Goddess to my care, and bade me bear it back to our temple."

"Then may her soul endure the tortures of Patalo, and the curse of Kali descend swiftly!" Blake said sternly. "Thou hast proved thyself a faithful servant, Dass, and if proof be forthcoming thou shalt become exalted in thy temple. I bid thee tell me the story of this heathen Parsee, for it is strange to my ears. I have served long in the Temple of Mahana, and news does not reach us of the north."

Dass's black eyes filled with triumph at the praise of the apparent priest.

"It is a long story, great one," he said slowly, "and was told to me by my beloved master Bhur Singh. The Eye of our Goddess was stolen from our temple more than twenty years ago, by a renegade priest, who had been banished and disgraced by our illustrious caste. A monsoon ago the renegade became stricken with fever, and, when dying, confessed that he had sold the Eye, of priceless worth, to a Parsee merchant, known as Josef Agran. The Parsee, Josef Agran, was traced, and, a dying man, confessed that twenty years ago he had given the ruby of our goddess to his daughter, as a marriage dowry. That daughter had married a white sahib, and was now living in England. My illustrious master, who had known the mem-sahib, Zenda Agran, in his youth, was entrusted with the mission of recovering the ruby."

Dass spoke with a refined Sanskrit accent that brought a faintly puzzled look to the detective's eyes. He had previously believed the rogue to be of the servitor caste, but the mar had the well-cultured features and jaunty bearing of a higher caste. There was something suggestive of the military in the square shoulder and close-cropped pomaded hair.

"Thou art apparently of higher caste than thy position of servant to Bhur Singh denotes," Blake said. "Thy learning would fit thee for the exalted rank of priesthood, should it be thy desire that the gratitude of Dhermer Rajah of thy temple take that form. How camest thou to be the servant of Singh?"

Dass glanced down whimsically at his tattered clothing, then drew himself proudly erect.

"Twenty-five years ago I was a Subadour-major in the service of the Emperor," he said, a vagabond smile curving his lips. "A white sahib, the officer in charge of my regiment, accused me of stirring up sedition among the Pathans while we were quartered in the cantonment at Peshawar. I could not refute the charge, so was drummed out of the service. For

years, great one, I became a sold-e of fortune and a wanderer. I have visited many countries, for I was a serang in the services of the B... company for many years. I met my late master while at Madras, five years ago. He was a Barrister then, and I have since served him in the capacity of major-domo, in his household at Khan Dur."

"Your story has interested me greatly," Blake said. "It is not fitting thou should remain in this house of iniquity, for the rank of priesthood will soon be thine. I will take thee back to my hotel, until preparations can be made for our journey to Khan Dur. But first hand me the ruby, so that I may be assured of its safety. There are none who dare attack and rob a Dhermer Rajah, but with thee it is different."

Without hesitation, Dass dived his hand into the neck of his shirt, and brought out a small goat-skin bag. After glancing cautiously towards the passage, he opened the neck, and took out the huge ruby, which, on that fateful night, Lady Hartley had given to Lillah.

Catching the flickering light from the evil-smelling kerosene lamp, the peerless stone flamed with pulsating, blood-red fire, a thing of seemingly living beauty. Sexton Blake's eyes flashed with triumph. He cared nothing for the Stone of Khan Dur. All he felt at that moment was that, found in the possession of Gunga Dass, it was proof of Lady Hartley's innocence and the Hindoo's guilt.

He stretched out his hand for the jewel that lay in the brown hand of the Hindoo. Once the ruby was in his possession, the arrest could be made.

The Hindoo's fingers had clenched rigidly over the ruby, and the hand was slowly being drawn back across the table. Blake glanced swiftly at the dusky face, and saw that Dass's eyes were fixed suspiciously, intently, upon his own hand, which lay, palm upwards, upon the table. He looked quickly down; then bit his lips with annoyance.

There was a chink in the armour of his clever disguise!

Instead of the palm of his hand being a dirty pink, as are the palms of all Hindoos, it was as brown as his arms and face!

Dass sprang to his feet with a cry of anger and fear, thrusting the ruby into the goat-skin bag, the latter into his breast.

"Padalon! Who art thou?" he cried hoarsely. "That is not the palm of a Hindoo!"

As he spoke, his hand flashed forward and tore the beard from the detective's face. Evading Tinker's grasp, he sprang for the passage, and escaped.

"Mahomet! Gahana! Come jeldee!" he shouted.

The door leading into the passage was flung open, and the soft patter of naked feet sounded along the stone corridor. Blake gave one swift comprehensive glance round the room. Escape by way of the window was impossible, for it was heavily barred.

"It's no use lad!" he shouted. "Our only chance is to fight our way through them!"

CHAPTER 10.

A Desperate Struggle—The Detective's Rush—The Escape of Gunga Dass.

"THEY are spies—Christian dogs!" Dass shouted savagely. "Are these sons of Yama to desecrate the memory of our goddess and the sacred robes of our priests?"

Cries of anger arose from the evil-visaged crowd. Dass, emboldened by their arrival, of the scene, sprang upon Blake and Tinker to intercept their dash for liberty.

"Look out, guv'nor!" yelled Tinker.

As he rushed at Blake, Dass's hand had shot down to his belt, and the yellow light from the lamp glinted on the blade of a sailor's sea-knife.

Tinker, realising his master's danger, snatched up the lamp, and flung it at the rage-distorted face. It was a good shot. With a sharp cry of pain, Dass staggered back, and the lamp, rebounding to the floor, spluttered for a few seconds, then went out.

Except for a feeble glimmer of moonlight that filtered in through the barred window, the room was now in darkness. The two white men struck out right and left at the vague shapes that loomed around them, and slowly fought their way towards the door.

"Now, young un, both together! Keep a stiff lip, and we'll beat 'em yet!" Blake shouted, in cheery tones.

The night was hot and arid. The sweat poured down their faces as they fought, side by side, towards their only avenue of escape.

A shadowy figure darted towards Blake, and the detective, exerting his powerful muscles, seized the man by the waist, and, using the fellow's own impetus for his undoing, raised him clean above his head, flinging him in the midst of a group of their assailants.

"Played, guv'nor!" gasped Tinker, as he upreared a particularly savage-looking Hindoo who had leapt for the lad's throat. "Now's our chance!"

As the weight of the flying man struck them, the natives toppled over like ninepins well taken by the "cheese," and, grasping their opportunity, Blake and his young assistant fought and stumbled over the recumbent bodies to the passage.

But here fresh trouble awaited them.

Owing to the smallness of the room, at least a dozen of the natives had been unable to join in the fight up to the present, so had formed a second line in the passage, their evident object being to prevent escape.

"Back to back, young 'un!" Blake shouted. "Don't draw your automatic if you can help it. Stick to your fists!"

His cheerfulness gave the plucky youngsters renewed courage in the fight against such heavy odds. Quick to grasp his master's meaning, Tinker rushed forward, and placed his back against Blake's. The detective's arms were shooting out like piston-rods, and the brown figures, glistening with sweat, crashed to the

floor beneath the weight of his powerful blows. Tinker, keeping up with his master's movement as best he could, warded off the blow that would otherwise have fallen upon his master's back and head, and, youngster though he was, he fought with the tenacity of a bullock.

Under Blake's desperate attack the Hindoos began to lose heart, and Dass his face cut and bleeding from the sharp corners of the lamp, tried feverishly to urge them to greater effort. He knew that if Blake escaped his own crafty ambitions would be shattered, and his liberty threatened—in all probability, his neck!

"Does the blood of Mother Kali run as water in your veins, O children of unspeakable shame?" he cried bitingly. "Are the Christian dogs to escape unharmed after their insult to Kali's shrine?"

The biting scorn in his voice had the desired effect, and, hastily getting into a rough formation, the enemy made an attack. Dass was again the leader. He rushed savagely forward, the knife gleaming in his upraise, and

Blake leapt nimbly to one side, and, unable to check his impetus, Dass crashed into the wall, the blade of the knife splintering in the haft as it was plunged against the hard stone. Blake sent out a straight left on its painful mission, and, catching Dass behind the ear, followed it up with a short-arm jab to the ribs.

With a groan, the man reeled to the floor, half-stunned. All the vim went out of the evil crowd as their leader fell, and Dass, writhing in agony on the floor, cursed them fluently.

"Collar him, Tinker!" cried Blake. "We must have that murderer—and the stone!"

A shriek of terror left the lip of Gunga Dass.

"Dogs!" he screamed at the beaten Hindoos. "Cowards! I call upon you to protect me against these Christians. I am of the Temple of Khan Dur. I hold the sacred Eye of our Goddess, and these foreign devils would rob me of it! Courage! They are but two against many."

"Follow me, young 'un!"

Blake called out the command sharply. Thence, spurred on by religious fervour now, had gathered around the fallen Dass. Knives gleamed in the pale light, and evil eyes nasced almost as menacingly. Blake, to his bitter chagrin, realised that it would be impossible to accomplish Dass's arrest against such odds.

"Make for the top of those stairs yonder, Tinker," he cried. "It will be a good point of vantage, and we can keep them at bay."

With a rush that scattered the Thugs in all directions, they fought their way to the outside of their assailants; then raced madly for the stairs. With the yelling horde close at their heels, they mounted the steps.

Reaching the top, they swung round and faced the enemy. A knife whizzed venomously through the air, and Blake felt a slight prick as the weapon lodged in the heavy folds of his turban. He plucked out the knife, and flung it full in the face of the new leader, who was rushing up the stairs towards them.

The handle of the heavy knife caught the man with stunning force, and, with a hoarse cry of pain, he flung up his arms and toppled backwards, tripping up those who were following him.

This offered a few second's welcome respite, and Blake, glancing swiftly over his shoulder, saw at the far end of the corridor a door that stood slightly ajar.

"Come, lad! Perhaps we shall be able to make our escape through that door. It is our only chance. They are mad now, and will have no mercy!"

They raced along the passage, and the Hindoos, gaining courage as they saw them retreat, swarmed up the stairs after them, yelling fiercely. By this time the odds had heavily increased, for the sounds of the struggle had reached the street, and the scum of the native quarters were streaming in through the cafe entrance.

Inside the room, they bolted the door, and glanced quickly around. They found themselves in a well-furnished compartment opening out upon a low veranda, by means of a French window.

"This way, young 'un!"

Blake crossed to the window eagerly, but drew back with a sharp exclamation of dismay. About fifty of the natives were hurrying round the corner, and, reaching the portion of the street that faced the balcony, they stood in a gesticulating group. Others came racing from the numerous side-streets. The native quarters were in an uproar.

The stout door quivered beneath repeated blows which threatened to send it crashing inward at any moment. Blake set his jaw squarely. He crossed swiftly to a chest that stood half concealed by a bamboo bed, and, pulling the chest from beneath the bed flung back the lid.

A cry of satisfaction came from his lips as he took out an armful of native clothing.

"Quick, Tinker! Take off your moustache and slip into these," he whispered. "We must trust to luck to get away unsuspected. That door will give way soon, and we shall be caught like rats in a trap. As soon as you are ready, hide beneath the bed and leave the rest to me."

Tearing off his priestly robes, Blake hurriedly, twisted a dhoti about his legs and slipped into a native shirt of gaudy design. He wiped the caste mark from his forehead and kicked off his sandals. In a very few minutes, under cover of that room, the high priest of Kali and his servant had disappeared, and in their places stood two ordinary natives, garbed like the yelling horde outside. Blake hurriedly folded the priestly garments, and thrust them into the chest, pushing the latter back in its place under the bed.

"Ready, lad?" he whispered.

"Yes, gov'nor!" Tinker said softly, creeping from beneath the bed.

Blake extinguished the kerosene lamp, plunging the scene into darkness. Then he picked up a stout chair and faced the window,

CHAPTER 11.

 Dass's Revenge—The "Stinging Death"—
The Temple of Khan Dur.

A GHARRY halted beneath the glass facade of that great junction of the G.I.P. Railway, London Road Station, Bombay, and a coolie porter, hurrying forward, flung open the door for Sexton Blake and his young assistant to alight.

At the detective's bidding the coolie shouldered their luggage, consisting of a small trunk, two Winchester rifles, blankets, and a mosquito-net, and carried it to a European compartment of the Madras mail, which was drawn up in the departure bay.

As they entered the carriage, a Hindoo, clean-shaven, and garbed in the gaudy robes of the sudra, or servile, caste, slipped from behind a pile of luggage which had hitherto concealed his presence. The native glanced furtively around, and then, with savage, brooding eyes, entered one of the Hindoo compartments immediately in the rear of those reserved for white men.

His sole luggage consisted of a small tin box with a perforated lid; and when he had seated himself he lifted the lid and examined the contents cautiously, then replaced the box upon the rack above his head.

"The 'Stinging Death'!" he muttered, a light of evil flaming in his dark eyes. "These Christian dogs shall writhe in the tortures of Padalon before sunset. By Kali, I swear it!"

Unconscious that they had been watched, Sexton Blake and Tinker lolled beneath the cooling breeze circulated by an electric fan. It was a sleeping compartment, as are all European carriages in India, and suspended above their heads were two rack beds.

"How long before we reach Madras, guv'nor?"

"About thirty-six hours, young 'un, as this is a mail train. Did you see any signs of Dues on the platform?"

Tinker shook his head, and, crossing to the window, scanned the cosmopolitan crowd that thronged the platform.

"I don't see him amongst that lot, sir," he said, returning to his seat. "The only thing to do is to wait for him to show his hand. He'll do that soon enough, since it means the end of everything for him if we reach Khan Dur. Perhaps he caught the midnight mail, and will try to ambush us as we are trekking through the jungle to the temple."

Sexton Blake looked grave as he filled and lighted his briar.

"It is quite possible, my boy," he agreed, "and the best thing we can do is to pick up a dozen bearers of the Chetris caste when we arrive at Madras. They are splendid fighters, and born soldiers. Dass will not be particular what means he uses to prevent us from reaching Khan Dur. The Chetris can be relied upon should trouble of any sort arise. It is possible that Gunga Dass has adopted some slight disguise, and is travelling on the same train. Hullo! What does this fellow want?"

The door was fast splintering beneath the heavy blows, and a few seconds later it burst from its hinges and crashed to the ground.

Raising the chair above his head, the detective flung it with all his force against the window. The following crash and tinkle of falling glass, echoed through the street. Blake, dropping to his knees, crouched back against the wall.

"Jeldee! The Christian dogs have escaped through the window!" cried a voice that the detective recognised as belonging to Dass. "After them!"

Blake smiled grimly at the success of his ruse. They could hear the patter of many feet running towards the window, and the curses that were showered upon their heads as the naked feet were cut by the broken glass that littered the floor.

"All right, lad," whispered Blake, after a few seconds and they knew they were alone in the room. "The beggars have dropped from the veranda, and the rest have joined them in the hunt. We will make our escape by way of the cafe entrance. Even if we should meet a guard in the passage they may not, in this confusion, recognise us in this fresh disguise."

Tinker crawled from beneath the bed and they went cautiously down the corridor to the cafe.

The place was almost deserted, and the few natives they met, after glancing at them, were deceived. But out in the street the Hindoos were jabbering and running about excitedly. A small posse of native police, attracted to the spot by the uproar, did their best to restore order, but the crowd was hopelessly out of hand.

Blake and Tinker slipped, unsuspected, amongst them and leisurely made their way on foot, as they did not want to attract attention by hailing a gharry.

"Dass has slipped through our fingers again, lad," Blake said grimly, as they limped somewhat painfully back to the hotel. "Yet to-night has not been an utter failure. It has proved conclusively that my deductions were correct, and we have gleaned the full story of Lady Hartley's romantic past."

"Haven't we enough proof now, guv'nor, to call upon the officer in charge of the European police, and have the cafe raided? We might get Dass that way."

Blake shook his head.

"Dass is a man of resource and cunning," he said quietly, "and not the illiterate Hindoo of low caste we at first imagined him to be. By now he will have adopted some sort of a disguise, for he knows by to-night's happenings that we are hot upon his trail. We will return to the hotel for the night, my boy. I am convinced that to search for him in this bewildering maze of native quarters would be hopeless. Tomorrow we will start on a journey to the temple of Khan Dur, where we will lay a trap for the scoundrel—who will, however, exert every effort to prevent us from reaching the temple and acquainting the high priests of his treachery."

The carriage-door had opened to admit the uniformed figure of a half-caste guard.

"First stop, Poona, sir! Will you require tiffin there?" he asked. "You are the only Europeans travelling by this train, and I shall have to wire through to Poona for your meals."

"Yes. Order tiffin for two," Blake said.

The train rumbled out of the station, and, leaving the outskirts of Bombay behind, roared over an expanse of sunlit desolation. Tiring of the monotonous plains of yellow, boulder-strewn waste, the detectives buried themselves behind their Indian newspapers. As dusk was beginning to fall they entered the suburbs of Poona.

Blake threw his paper aside and yawned.

"We had better make up our beds, young 'un!" he said, taking the roll of blankets from the rack. "After tiffin we will turn in. The trek to Khan Dur will be pretty gruelling at this time of the year."

"You're right, guv'nor! Phew! It's hot enough already. If ever we go smash in the detective business, I'm going to set up in the ice-cream line out here. It 'ud be an act of charity. How would a strawberry and vanilla go down row, guv'nor?"

"It will be hotter still to-morrow, lad. The further south we go the worse it will get."

They completed the task of making up their beds as the train glided into the station. Carriage doors were flung open and the Hindoos streamed to the native char-stalls which lined the platform. Pango and Bhisti-wallahs, carrying trays of native "konnah," and goat skins filled with water, cried out their wares and found ready customers.

"Come along, Tinker! We will get to the refreshment-rooms. The train only halts for half an hour!"

They left the carriage and entered the buffet. As the swing doors closed behind them the Hindoo who had secreted himself in the compartment behind the one reserved for white travellers, picked up the tin box and left the compartment.

He entered the European compartment vacated by the detectives, and his dark eyes lit up with satisfaction as they came to rest upon the two beds. He opened the box gingerly, and, after glancing furtively over his shoulder, took a pair of tweezers from his belt.

Dipping the tweezers into the box he brought out a scorpion—the dread scourge of the East. The drab, crab-like body writhed, and the scaly tail, containing the venomous sting, struck swiftly and repeatedly in an attempt for freedom. Lifting up the blankets, the Hindoo placed the deadly arachnida between the sheets.

Finding the pressure from the tweezers gone the scorpion ceased its writhings and huddled down, its claws deeply buried in the sheets, the needle-like sting, that brings agony, and sometimes death, ready to strike.

Dipping the tweezers once more into the box the Hindoo brought out another of the venomous creatures and quickly placed it between the sheets of the other bed. Then an evil smile of

triumph twisting his lips, he hurried from the compartment and joined the crowd of natives crowding around a near-by char-stall.

Unconscious of the fate in store for them, Sexton Blake and Tinker sat beneath the punkah in the buffet and made a hearty meal. Other Europeans were taking tiffin, as several more trains had halted at the station, and the lively conversation helped to make up for the badly-cooked English food.

After tiffin they returned to the carriage and the tedious journey was resumed. An hour passed, and then Sexton Blake flung the stump of a final cigar through the window and yawned.

"Time to turn in, young 'un."

"Bet you five rupees I'm in that apology for a bed first, guv'nor?" Tinker returned.

"Done!" Blake said promptly. "And if you don't pay up, you young rascal, I'll stop it from your next allowance!"

Taking two pairs of pyjamas from the trunk, Tinker handed one pair to his master. With laughing haste they undressed. Almost together they scrambled into the hammock-like beds, the youngest their fraction of a second to the good.

"Guess you can hand over those rupees in the morning, guv'nor," chuckled Tinker. "Good-night!"

"Good-night, lad!" smiled Blake. "You've missed your vocation. You should have been a quick-change artist!"

The detective stretched out his hand and, after swinging the bag-like screen of green baize over the bowl of the electric light, snuggled down between the cool and refreshing sheets.

Then, quite suddenly, his movements ceased; he lay rigid, tensely strained.

A slight creeping sensation about the calf of his leg had almost immediately arrested his attention. For some moments he lay still, wondering if one of those pests of India, a tick-bug, had found its way into the bed. The sensation becoming unbearable, he sat up and prepared to draw his leg from beneath the blankets.

But after the first movement he paused.

The creeping sensation had become more pronounced, and a faint sibilation, muffled by the enveloping folds of the blankets, faintly reached his ears.

He felt himself tensely waiting for something—but what? His nerves tingled with a horrible apprehension. Was it a snake?

Then came the grip on his leg of sharp, crab-like claws, and he felt the nerves twitch spasmodically despite his efforts to remain rigid.

He realised the truth now—a scorpion was in his bed!

Blake was familiar with the dread scourge of the East. He knew that the slightest movement would result in the creature's venomous sting being driven into the flesh which it had bunched up with its sharp claws.

Beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead. He fought against the promptings of instinct—an overpowering impulse to kick out violently and try to fling the loathsome creature from his leg.

Then a slight movement from Tinker's bed reached his ears, and a fresh fear possessed him. "Guv'nor! There's something in my bed—something crawling!"

"Lie still, lad!" Blake commanded, in sharp tones. "I'm afraid it's a scorpion! If you keep quiet there is a chance that it may creep from you to the blankets. If you feel yourself free of it, spring out of bed at once."

"A—a scorpion, sir?" Tinker gasped in alarmed tones. "It's gripping me now!" There came a sharp, agonised cry in the gloom. "Heaven, guv'nor—I'm stung!"

Blake gritted his teeth.

"Quick, lad! Knock it from you before the poison is all injected!" he cried, forgetting his own peril in his anxiety for Tinker.

The claws gripping Blake's own leg bit deeper. A red-hot needle seemed to pierce his quivering flesh, and a scalding, throbbing pain seared rapidly through his lower limbs as the poison began to circulate in his blood. With a groan escaping his compressed lips he reached for the electric bulb and removed the screen, instantly flooding the carriage with welcome light.

Flinging back the blankets, he glanced down at his leg, that now seemed paralysed by an agonising cramp. The claws of the arachnida were buried into the rapidly purpling flesh, and the sinister tail was darting with repeated swift-ness.

"By Heaven, Tinker! What villainy is this?" he cried hoarsely, brushing the loathsome creature with a swift movement of his hand to the floor, where it writhed convulsively for a few moments, then lay still.

But Tinker, bitten in the foot, had mercifully faint. In spite of the intense agony which racked his every nerve, Blake stumbled from his bed and pulled the communication cord.

Crossing over to Tinker, he jerked back the blankets and knocked to the floor the scorpion that gripped the lad's ankle; then, with a groan of agony, Blake collapsed to the floor.

There came a harsh grating as the brakes were applied, and the carriage shunted violently. The train halted, and soon the door opened to admit the half-caste guard.

Sexton Blake lay in a heap upon the carriage floor. With a cry of alarm the man crossed to his side. The only visible sign of life being the spasmodic twitching of the facial muscles, the guard placed his hand over the passenger's heart and found that it throbbed jerkily. Then his eyes fell upon the crab-like creatures, and a cry of understanding left his lips.

"Scorpions!" he gasped.

Turning up the legs of Blake's pyjamas the Eurasian chafed the twitching, contracted muscles. By this time the Hindoos had left their carriages and were flocking on the line. The half-caste engine driver, sensing that something was wrong, made for the European compartment.

"What's the matter, Johnson?"

"The European passengers have been stung by scorpions," replied the guard. "How they got into the carriage beats me. Get those darkies back into the train and run through to Khada-

har. I know a madah there who has a reputation for charming away the evil effects of scorpion bites."

"How the blazes did they get into the beds?" said the driver angrily.

"That's the mystery," Johnson said. "I've never seen the brutes as large as this, except in the banana groves of the South. There's been some underland work here. I reckon some durned nigger has been handing something out to these Englishmen. Hurry up, or they'll be goners, and that'll mean a shindy for you and me."

The engine-driver scratched his close-cropped head, and wiping the sweat from his grimy brow with a piece of oily waste, left the carriage. A few seconds later he returned.

"You're right, Johnson!" he said wrathfully.

"Some skunk's been tampering with the boiler while I was away! All the hot water has run out on the line, and I found the emptying tap turned full on. It'll be half an hour before I can get up enough steam to reach Khadabar!"

The guard swore softly.

"It looks like a deliberate attempt at murder, mate. If we don't reach Khadabar soon, these poor chaps will be done for!" he said angrily.

The driver hurried back to the engine, and laboured feverishly with the fireman to fill up the boiler from the spare tank. Twenty minutes elapsed before the indicator on the steam-gauge ticked over to the correct pressure to start the engine. A few seconds later the train was gliding onwards again towards Khadabar.

The guard had, meanwhile, set to work on the rigid figures of the white men, but it was not until they halted at the wayside station of Khadabar that Blake opened pain-glazed eyes. The agony of the poison still racked his limbs, and in spite of an attempt to lie still his legs bunched up to his chin and a groan escaped his blue-tinged lips.

The door opened, and the engine-driver, followed by a crowd of coolies, entered the carriage. Placing the white men upon stretchers they carried them from the station to a group of daub and wattle huts which flanked a roughly-constructed road. Outside one of the huts they gently lowered the stretchers to the ground. A few minutes later the bent, shrivelled figure of an aged Hindoo, clothed in the monk-like robes of the madah caste, shuffled out towards them.

"These white men need your skill, madah," said the guard respectfully. "They have been badly bitten by scorpions. Can you save them?"

The old doctor looked compassionately at Tinker and Blake.

"I will attend them," he said. "You may safely leave them in my hands."

As the Eurasians left, the madah bent over the contracted figures and a light of pity illumined the old man's faded eyes. He went to his hut, and returned presently with a small lotah filled with a greenish herbal brew.

"Drink this, sahib," he said gently. "It will ease your pain."

Blake drank a little of the medicine, and then tried vainly to speak. His lips twitched, but no sound escaped them. But after a while, and

the influence of the antidote, the huddled limbs relaxed, and with a sigh of relief he drifted into sleep. The madah had, meanwhile, attended to Tinker, who was still unconscious.

Next he kindled a fire, and filling a lotah with water, suspended it from a tripod above the leaping flames which illumined the strange scene with a ruddy glow. A crowd of natives had gathered round, and they gazed at the man of "magic" from awestricken eyes. The medicine-man took up a bamboo rod and, chanting in a sonorous voice, emptied a bag of dried roots into the now steaming lotah, which he stirred slowly.

After he had taken the lotah from the fire he allowed the mixture to cool. When satisfied with the temperature of the brew he soaked some strips of linen in it and poulticed the purple, swollen sting-marks on the quivering limbs.

His task finished, he squatted by their sides and chanted monotonously to his gods. Dawn tinted the Eastern sky with rosy fingers, but still the white men slept on. It was not until evening came that Sexton Blake opened heavy eyes.

The madah was swiftly at his side.

"It is well, sahib," he quavered. "The gods have been merciful."

Sexton Blake struggled to his feet. A painful stiffness cramped his limbs, and it was with difficulty that he crossed over to Tinker.

"And my friend?" he asked anxiously.

"Will he, too, recover?"

"Yes, sahib!" croaked the madah. "The poison has now left the chota-sahib. Soon he will awake."

Blake sighed with relief as he gazed compassionately at the sleeping figure of his assistant. Then his face set grimly.

"I wonder if Dass is responsible for this villainy?" he muttered. "By Heaven, he must be, and shall pay dearly when the reckoning comes!" He turned to the madah. "Where are we, and how far is it to the nearest railway station?" he asked.

"You are at the village of Khadahar," replied the madah. "The station lies but a few hundred yards away. If the sahib wishes to change his clothes he will find his trunk inside my hut. It was brought by the Eurasian guard who had you carried from the train."

Blake thanked the kindly man and entered the hut. Soon he reappeared, clad in a suit of white drill.

"Let my friend sleep on as long as possible, madah," he said. "I am going to the station to ask the authorities to have the next mail train halted, as this is not one of its usual stopping places. By to-night I trust the chota-sahib will have recovered sufficiently to be able to resume the journey."

"The chota-sahib is strong, and will soon recover, sahib," said the old man. "At first I feared greatly for you both, but the secrets of the jungle herbs are mine, and all danger is now passed."

Sexton Blake nodded, then made his way to the station, where he found the Hindoo station-master in his hut.

"I want you to wire through to Poona at once," Blake said. "Ask the station-master there to give instructions to the driver of to-night's mail to halt here. What time does the next mail train pass through Khadahar as a rule?"

"About nine o'clock, sahib."

Blake glanced at his watch.

"You will have to hurry, then! Do you think you can get through to Poona in time?"

"Yes, sahib. I will send a coolie to the hut of the madah for your luggage. The authorities have been notified by the railway police of your illness, and will gladly halt the train for you. They are trying to get on the track of the man who placed the scorpions in your beds."

Blake thanked the man and made his way back to the hut. He had little hope that the station police would lay hands on Gunga Dass.

Tinker was awake when he arrived, and although the boyish face was mottled with purple blotches, the poison had left him without serious effect. Blake looked gratefully at the old madah, for he knew that but for the medicine-man's skill and knowledge of herbs, the sting of the dread scourge might have ended in death for him and the suffering lad.

"Hallo, guv'nor! How do you feel? I'm aching all over as if a horse had kicked me! I suppose we have to thank Dass for that pleasant little surprise? I hope you'll let me have a few minutes alone with the rotter when we collar him!"

Blake smiled grimly.

"It was Dass all right, young 'un," he said. "He must have shadowed us in disguise, and travelled down upon the same train, finding an opportunity to place the scorpions in our beds while we were having tiffin at Poona. He probably thinks us dead by now, as we might well have been had it not been for our good friend here, the madah. But Dass will find the day of reckoning not far ahead now. To-night we resume the trail."

He turned to the old medicine-man and warmly clasped the withered, claw-like hand.

"Perhaps you will be good enough to have some food prepared for us, my friend?" he said, drawing some coins from his pocket.

The madah stepped back, and held up his brown arm protestingly.

"I seek not for reward, sahib," he said, a smile of friendliness wrinkling his parchment-like face. "The honour of having been of service to the sahibs is reward sufficient for me, whose needs are few. Food is already prepared for you. It will not be the kind you are accustomed to, but you may partake of it freely, for it is wholesome."

After they had eaten, the old madah insisted upon giving them some small earthenware pots of herbal ointment, which he declared to be a remedy against the venom of snake bites. A coolie arrived from the station, and after Blake had handed over their luggage, they bade

the kindly old man good-bye and made their way to the station.

"It was an attempt to murder us, my boy," said the detective gravely. "But for our luck in the guard knowing of that skilful old madah, it would have been successful."

Soon after they arrived at the station the Madaras mail glided in, and a little later they were speeding southwards on their journey.

At evening the next day they arrived at Madras. Tinker heaved a sigh of relief as he stepped out upon the platform and eased his cramped limbs.

Blake ordered a rickshaw-wallah to take their luggage to the Oriental Hotel, and they walked then to the labour recruiting office near the Fort.

Little difficulty was experienced in collecting the Chetri bearers, and after Blake had given instructions for the men to be outside the hotel the following morning, they ordered a rickshaw and were driven to the Oriental.

"How long will it take to reach Khan Dur, guv'nor?"

"About thirty-six hours, young 'un, if all goes well. I don't think that Dass will worry about us any more, as he probably thinks he has put 'paid' to the account. Still, it is wise to take precautions. After tiffin we will get to bed and try to get rid of this painful stiffness. Tomorrow we must be up at dawn."

Early the next morning they left the town behind, and were soon trekking across a rough road which dissected miles of flooded, undulating rice-fields. At night they halted at a roadside shrine, surrounded by straggling rows of mud huts.

The head-man of the village provided them with food and shelter, and early the following morning they resumed the trail.

As dusk was falling Blake halted the bearers and pointed to the glistening white dome of a temple which reared itself against a superb background of palm and peepul trees.

"That is Khan Dur, Tinker!" he said. "And, let us hope, the end of the long trail!"

CHAPTER 12.

The End of the Long Trail—At Kali's Shrine.

"KHAN DUR, my boy—the jungle city of India!" said Blake.

Their arrival created a great deal of friendly curiosity, and natives flocked from the straggling rows of daub and wattle huts as they marched by.

High on the turrets and pagodas of the temple, beacon lights flared with a ruddy glow, calling the worshippers of Mother Kali to her shrine in the temple of Khan Dur, a magnificent building of ancient Indian architecture, built in the form of a huge circle, and crowned in the centre by an immense dome of gleaming marble.

Blake halted his bearers some two hundred yards away, and bade them be seated. Portals were flocking in through the carved windows, and from inside came the thunderous roll of a giant tom-tom and the brazen clash of cymbals.

"They are evidently holding a big religious ceremony as a thanks-offering for the return of the ruby, Tinker," said Blake. "Take off your boots and socks, and we will enter. They would consider it desecration should we enter their temple without removing our footwear."

"How are we going to work the thing, guv'nor?" asked Tinker, wrestling with a bootlace. "Do you think the priests will hand Dass over to us?"

"I don't know, young 'un. When they hear that Dass has murdered their emissary the priests will have difficulty in preventing the worshippers from tearing him limb from limb. We must hope for the best, though. As we enter I want you to cover Dass with your rifle, for we cannot risk him slipping through our fingers again. I will explain the object of our mission to the priests."

Barefooted, they entered the temple porch. Chained to the walls were the Temple fakirs, withered of limb. The detective took some small change from his pocket, in response to their cries for alms, receiving fervent blessings from those to whom he gave, and curses from the few he passed by.

"Look!" whispered Tinker.

Through the open portals a strange scene met their eyes. In the immense building, supported by a thousand pillars of grotesquely carved sandstone, knelt hundreds of native worshippers, their voices rising and falling in a solemn chant. A group of charans beat wildly upon brazen gongs and tom-toms, and upon a raised throne at the far end was the shrine of Kali.

The idol, representing the figure of a woman bearing in her arms a newly-born infant, the symbol of motherhood, was fashioned from Indian gold, and swathed with jewelled tapes-tries which sparkled and gleamed in the gloom.

Yet, peerless above all the glittering gems, flamed one huge ruby, once more forming the Eye of Kali, in the exact centre of the golden brow of the goddess. It was the long-lost ruby of the Temple of Khan Dur, which had brought tragedy into the life of the Parsee bride.

Grouped before the idol stood the Dhermer Rajah of the temple and his priests. Dass was seated upon a carved throne by the head priest's side.

Suddenly the Dhermer Rajah held up his hand, and the monotonous chanting and wild music ceased.

"The Eye of Kali is now restored, and our goddess can once more see to confound the evil wrought by Yama, the devil-god," said the priest in Sanscrit. "Prosperity will once more shine upon us, and crops that have failed will yield in abundance, for Mother Kali will watch over her children. As a reward for his faithfulness, Gunga Dass, who has faced many

dangers in his devoted service to his dead master, Bhur Singh, and who has restored the sacred ruby, shall be exalted to the rank of priesthood!"

Murmurs of assent rose from the worshippers, and Dass, his dark eyes flaming with triumph, rose proudly to his feet.

A group of the priests walked towards him, and the detective saw that the ceremony of investing him with the honour of priesthood was being performed, although they were too far away to hear the soft, chanting voices.

"Come, Tinker!" whispered Blake. "Dass is about to tell his yarn. We will get ours in first. Don't forget to cover the man and watch him closely."

They walked down the aisle, conscious of the gaze from a thousand pairs of eyes. Dass, suddenly recognising them, gave a sharp yelp of fear and glanced wildly round, his terror-stricken eyes seeking an avenue of escape.

"Hands up, Dass!" Tinker shouted brusquely. "Up with 'em! We're not taking any chances this time!"

Realising that the game was up, Dass slowly raised his hands above his head, and stood staring into the menacing muzzle of Tinker's Winchester.

The Dhermer Rajah, his face aflame with anger and resentment, held up his hand to silence the angry murmurs that left the lips of the worshippers. Then he turned fiercely to Blake.

"Who art thou?" he cried angrily. "Thou art Christians, and hath desecrated our holy temple by threatening the most honoured of our priests!"

Sexton Blake leapt upon Dass and clicked the handcuffs on his brown wrists. Then he turned to the Dhermer Rajah.

"I come on a mission of peace," he said quietly. "The man you have just exalted to the rank of priesthood is the murderer of your emissary, Bhur Singh!"

"The white man lies!" Dass cried fiercely. "These are sahibs I told you of, Great One. They followed me to India, and have several times tried to rob me of the sacred ruby of our goddess! Even now they are trying to steal it from the temple by means of some trick!"

The grand old man looked troubled.

"Tell me thy story, white man, so that I may judge between good and evil," he said. "What proof hast thou that Gunga Dass slew his master? We hath exalted him to priesthood, and the trusted rank of Keeper of the Jewels, for he hath apparently proved himself a faithful servant. Should thou have proof that Dass is possessed of the evil one, then I bid thee tell me of thy knowledge."

Blake turned and faced the huge assembly. The brown faces were hostile, and sullen murmurs arose.

"The man you have honoured and exalted is a murderer, traitor, and thief!" he cried, in tones that reached every corner of the vast temple. "I am a detective, and have followed Dass to your country in order to arrest him on the charge of murdering his master, Bhur

Singh. Your Dhermer Rajah sent Singh to England on the mission of recovering the eye of your goddess, and, as you know, Gunga Dass accompanied him as his servant——"

"Listen not to the words of the white man," Dass cried desperately. "He speaks with the lips of Yama!"

"Silence!" commanded the Dhermer Rajah. Then, turning to the detective: "Thy words appear to be truthful, white man. How hast thou become possessed of this knowledge?"

"I will tell you the full story of Dass's treachery," Blake said. "The Parsee's daughter, Zenda Agran, became possessed of your sacred jewel in an entirely innocent manner. When she married the white sahib, over twenty years ago, it was given to her by her father, Joseph Agran, as a marriage dowry."

"Having, years later, discovered this, you despatched Bhur Singh to England to recover the Eye. Bhur Singh arrived safely in England, and late one night went to the house of Zenda Agran and demanded that the ruby should be returned to your temple. She was greatly upset to hear that the ruby in her possession was the stolen Eye of your goddess, and gladly handed the ruby to Singh. Dass was outside the window at the time, and as the jewel was handed to his master he crept in and foully stabbed him."

"It's a lie!" Dass shrieked desperately: "My beloved master was slain by the daughter of the heathen Parsee. I was faithful to the trust my dying master reposed in me——"

The Dhermer Rajah held up his hand for silence.

"Thy words lack conviction," he said coldly. Then, turning to the detective: "I bid you resume thy story, sahib."

"After murdering his master, Dass robbed him of the precious ruby and decamped. The next day the chota-sahib, who is my assistant, was brutally attacked by him, so that Dass might recover proofs which we held of his guilt. Twice he attempted the boy's life, and three days ago placed scorpions in our beds, as a last desperate attempt to prevent us from reaching Khan Dur and acquainting you with his villainy. But that is not all——"

Blake paused, and scanned the sea of dusky faces. They were listening intently to his denunciation of their new priest, and several ugly looks were flung at Dass, who was now trembling in abject fear.

"The Parsee's daughter," resumed the detective, "now a lady of high rank in my own country, stands unjustly accused of the murder of your emissary. Zenda Agran was always ignorant of the fact that the ruby given her by her father was a sacred emblem of your faith. Therefore she has done nothing to incur your displeasure, for she willingly gave the stone to Bhur Singh when she knew of its history. My object in following Dass to your country was to get a confession of the crime from him, and then take him back to England to stand his trial for murder. There he will be tried justly, condemned to death, and an

Innocent woman's name will be cleared from a cruel suspicion."

The Dhermer Rajah turned to Dass, and as Blake glanced at the venerable, wrinkled face of the grand old man, now bearing an expression of dignified wrath, he glimpsed something of the magnetic power of the man who swayed the hearts and minds of the thousands who flocked to his temple.

"Child of unspeakable shame. Truly has Yama claimed your evil soul. What is thy answer to the accusation the white man hast brought against thee?" he thundered.

Dass dropped to his knees, his manacled hands plucking feverishly at Dhermer Rajah's robes. Gone was the jouty, self-possessed Hindoo of military swagger, and in his place knelt a trembling man, self-condemned by every terror-stricken movement.

"Speak, dog!" thundered the old priest.

"Master, I beg of you to believe my story," whined Dass, his hands stretched out in supplication. "The white man lies. Here, on the steps of Kali's illustrious shrine, I swear it! Did I not bring the ruby safely back to the temple? Does not that prove my faithfulness?"

The Dhermer Rajah turned to Blake, and the anger that flamed in the faded eyes was slowly replaced by a look of doubt.

"I can answer that question, Dhermer Rajah," Blake said quietly. "Dass returned with the ruby because he knew that afterwards he would be held in high esteem. The position held by his unfortunate master would become his. Once in possession of the keys of the treasure chamber, the priceless jewels which adorn the shrines of your gods would have been stolen by him. He is a renegade and thief—as well as the murderer of Bhur Singh!"

Fierce cries of anger arose from the Hindoos and a threatening movement was made towards Dass.

Sexton Blake turned to the cowering man.

"Gunga Dass," he cried in Hindustani, in which tongue he could be heard and understood by all. "I hold proofs that will amply satisfy your Dhermer Rajah if I bring them forward. Your native laws will condemn you to death. On the other hand, if you confess your crime before a commissioner I shall have authority to take you from the punishment of your countrymen, and you will face your trial before a more merciful court in England. Choose!"

A cunning light flamed in Dass's eyes. Here he knew his case was hopeless should he face the rude trial of the priests of Khan Dur.

But thousands of miles lay between him and a trial in England—and there was the hope of escape on the way!

He decided quickly.

"I confess, Great One," he cried, turning to the Dhermer Rajah. "it is as the Christian says. I murdered my master, Bhur Singh, to whom the Parsee woman gave the Eye of Kali. I wished for the glory of returning the stone to our temple. Protect me from the wrath of thy people, Great One, and let me return with the Englishman for a just trial!"

"Look out, guv'nor!" cried Tinker.

The natives were flocking across the temple floor, and the foremost were already clambering up the sides of the throne. Knives flashed menacingly in the flickering light, and dark eyes flamed with the lust for revenge. Blake flung a look of appeal at the Dhermer Rajah.

For a moment the high priest hesitated.

"I command you to use your authority!" Blake cried sternly. "You have my promise that Dass shall pay the full penalty of his villainy. If your people slay him now—before I have his signed confession—an innocent woman will probably be hanged!"

The Dhermer Rajah held up his hand.

"Back—back!" he thundered. "O, children of Kali, would you desecrate the memory of our sacred goddess by spilling the blood of a faithless heart upon the steps of her illustrious shrine? Back, I command you, or I will evoke the displeasures of the gods upon you, and famine and pestilence shall fall upon the land! The white sahibs are our proven friends, and it is their wish that the traitor should go back with them to the land of the White Emperor. There he will meet a just punishment for his treachery."

The Hindoos cowered before the threat and slunk back. Calling his priests to his side, the old man held a hurried consultation with them. After they had dispersed, signal gongs were struck by the charans, and with one final prostration before the idol, the natives fled from the temple.

"Thou hast indeed proven thyself friend," said the Dhermer Rajah gratefully. "Dass, the son of Yama, shall return with thee to thy own country. It will be better for thee to leave Kran Dur before dawn, for my people lust for his blood. Food shall be prepared for thee and thy bearers. Dass can be locked in the temple dungeons for the time being. There he will be safe."

"I thank you, Dhermer Rajah," Blake said.

"We will leave Khan Dur within an hour. Kindly show me the way to the dungeons."

They entered a guarded corridor at the rear of the shrine, and the old man halted before a stout door, reinforced by bolts. He unlocked the door and Blake entered and subjected the cell to a careful examination. Satisfied that it was impossible for Dass to escape, he chained him to some strong fetters which hung from the stone wall. This done, the Dhermer Rajah locked the door and handed the key to Blake.

They rejoined Tinker, and the old man led them into a simply-furnished room. A bearer entered with food, and the high priest left them, for he would have lost caste by remaining in the room while the Christians ate.

"Well, guv'nor! Everything's plane sailing now. I expect the next move will be to return to England," Tinker said, attacking a piece of wild boar with gusto. "It was as good as a pantomime to watch Dass's face while you were telling your story. What about Mulberry, too? His face will be worth watching at the trial!"

Sexton Blake smiled.

"Yes, young'un. We will sail for England as soon as possible. But first of all I shall take

Dass before the Commissioner of Madras and obtain a signed and witnessed confession."

"Shall we sail from Madras, sir? It will save the journey to Bombay, and time is precious; for Lady Hartley's trial is due soon."

"Yes. I know the shipping-agents for the British-India boats at Madras, and I fancy we shall have little difficulty in getting passages aboard a mail packet. They call here twice a week. We will send a cablegram to Graham Wyld—Lady Hartley's barrister—and he will be able to get the trial suspended until we arrive with the evidence."

"And one to Jim, too, guv'nor. I bet the poor chap's living on thorns, and watching every mail for news of our success. It will be a happy day for him and Miss Lillah when Lady Hartley is cleared from all suspicion!"

The meal finished, they went out into the passage. The Dhermer Rajah awaited them, and they went back to the temple dungeons for their prisoner. Dass was sullen, but relieved to know he was going back to England to stand his trial. It was the lesser of the two evils.

"When thou art ready to depart, I will send a guide who will show thee a path through the jungle which avoids the main roads. It would not be safe to pass along the thoroughfares of the city, for my people are still angered, and may attempt to lynch Dass. When you get back to your own country, tell the daughter of Josef Agran that she has sought to fear, for it is not the way of our faith to visit the sins of the father upon the children."

When Dass had been securely handcuffed to Tinker's wrist, they walked back to where they had left the chetri bearers. After Blake had promised them a good reward they expressed their willingness to resume the journey without their night's rest. The Dhermer Rajah handed them a small charm as a protection against the evil spirits of the jungle, and, led by the bearer, they resumed the journey.

Madras was reached at dawn of the second day, and after rewarding the bearers, Blake dismissed them.

"What about Dass, guv'nor?" Tinker asked, with a distasteful glance into the sullen, brooding eyes of the man manacled to his wrist. "I've had about enough of the rotter! He isn't very cheerful company, and don't exactly smell like violets, either! Can't we hand him over to the Port authorities before we sail? I wouldn't sleep with the beggar again for a pension. I shall feel like bashing him soon, if I don't get rid of him."

Dass's dark eyes flamed with hatred.

"Dog!" he hissed. "One day you shall pay for your insult!"

"I reckon you're goin' to do the payin', my pippin!" Tinker said, gazing serenely into the rage-distorted face of the Hindoo.

"Enough of that, Dass!" Blake put in sharply. "I am now going to take you before the Commissioner. If you refuse to confess your guilt, I shall take you back to Khan Dur to face the vengeance of your own people. I fancy they would prove less merciful than the English

law. You will be wise to accept the lesser of the two evils. What is your answer?"

"I will confess!" Dass replied sullenly.

And that night his confession was taken down before a Commissioner; and Blake, within the next few days, obtained an extradition warrant. Three days after their arrival they were on board the s.s. Columbo, homeward bound.

"Thank goodness we shall soon be in England again, guv'nor!" Tinker said, as they stood on deck, watching the receding, purple coast-line of India. "India's all right, but I'm longing for the niff of the Baker Street Tube again!"

CHAPTER 13.

Port Said—A Thug's Cunning—A Surprise for Blake.

"WHAT about a trip ashore, guv'nor?" said Tinker. "The coal boats are coming over, so I expect we shall be here for a couple of hours at the least."

"Very well, my boy. I want to go ashore to send a cablegram to Graham Wyld, in order that he may know the exact date of our arrival. Also one to Mrs. Bardell."

The s.s. Columbo was drifting slowly up the fairway of the Suez, facing the main promenade of Port Said, and dropped anchor outside the Customs House. A fierce sun, unrelieved by the arid wind which blew with scorching breath from the great Sahara, blazed down, burning the cheeks of the two detective's who, leaning against the taffrail, gazed idly at the cosmopolitan shipping which lay dotting the canal mouth.

Enterprising Arabs, clad in soiled and tattered burnouses, rowed their bumboats alongside the liner and climbed like cats up the ropes suspended from the bulkheads, each laden with silks, dyed and curled ostrich feathers, Egyptian cigarettes and gaudy boxes filled with "Turkish Delight," of doubtful origin.

"What of Dass, sir? Shall I arrange with the stewards to take him his tiffin? We will have ours ashore, of course."

Blake hesitated for a moment, but glancing at the eager face of his young assistant, felt he could not deny the lad a trip around the interesting seaport. Dass had given no trouble during the trip, and was apparently resigned to his fate. Blake decided to leave him in charge of a steward, as there was little chance of the man attempting to escape. He was imprisoned in one of the cells in the after-hold and securely fastened in heavy ship's irons.

"Very well, young 'un!" he said. "Get the steward who waits at our table to take Dass his food. Here is the key of his irons. Tell the steward to unlock the wrist-bands only while he eats."

Tinker took the key from his master and hurried to the saloon, where a group of Hindoos

were industriously polishing the brass fittings. Tinker called one of them—a tall, well-built man with a thin beard, clad in a blue-and-white linen uniform.

"Look here, Gahana!" he said. "Don't trouble to lay our table for tiffin, as we are going ashore. Take to Gunga Dass, the prisoner, his curry and rice in about an hour's time. Here is the key of his irons. Just free his hands while he eats, and when he has finished securely fasten them again. Malaam?"

"I malaam, sahib!" said the steward; and, taking the key from Tinker, carefully placed it in his tunic pocket.

Tinker rejoined his master on the saloon deck, and they walked amidships, where gangways were being dropped to a small fleet of boats below, which were waiting to take passengers ashore.

After asking the quartermaster the exact time of the liner's departure, they stepped into one of the boats and were soon on the quayside.

From one of the portholes in the after-hold a pair of dark, vengeful eyes watched their departure. When they had disappeared from view amongst the cosmopolitan crowd that thronged the quay side, the owner of those eyes, manacled hand and foot in ponderous ship's irons, clanked across the floor and squatted down in the far corner of the cell, his head sunk despondently on his breast, his eyes eloquent of brooding despair.

For a long time he sat thus. Then the sharp click of the lock arrested his attention, and, arousing from his lethargy, he turned his eyes expectantly towards the door. It opened to admit the figure of Gahana, the steward, who carried a tray containing a plate of curry and rice, and a jug of water.

After securing the door behind him Gahana unlocked the prisoner's wrist cuffs and set the frugal meal before him. Dass ate greedily, and the plate was soon cleared.

"You got cigarette?" he asked, his dark eyes fixed pleadingly on the dusky face of the steward.

Gahana hesitated for a moment, but the appeal from a fellow-countryman was too strong for his native sense of duty, and, after lighting a cigarette, he placed it between Dass's lips.

With a muttered word of thanks Dass pulled away in keen enjoyment, his eyes fixed intently upon the dusky face of the steward, who now squatted opposite him, the subtle Eastern brain working with cunning speed.

The two Hindoos were similar in appearance. Both wore a sparse beard, were of the same height and build, and of copper-coloured skin.

A sudden light flamed in the dark eyes of the prisoner as he noted this, and, flinging away the stump of his cigarette, he held out his hands for the wristbands to be replaced.

The steward rose and placed the ponderous wrist-bands over the brown arms, then fumbled in his pocket for the key,

As he dragged it out Dass swayed slightly against him and the key dropped with a metallic clang to the iron floor,

The steward stooped hurriedly to retrieve it. His action brought the turbaned head dangerously close to Dass, and, quick as lightning, the prisoner raised his hands aloft, bringing them down, encased in the heavy irons, upon Gahana's head!

The heavy folds of the turban served to soften the blow, but the sudden shock caused the unfortunate man to lose his balance. With a cry of alarm he pitched face foremost to the ground.

Dass quickly slipped the unlocked cuffs from his wrists, and throwing himself forward, grasped the steward by the throat in a vice-like grip. The man struggled furiously, but Dass never relaxed his stronghold, for his was a strength born of the hope of freedom.

Soon the steward's struggles ceased, the man's swollen tongue lolled from between purple lips, the eyeballs protruded from their sockets; then the body went limp.

"Now, dog of a Christian, I'll beat you yet!" Dass panted.

His eyes dancing at the success of his murderous attack, he struggled to his feet. Picking up the key from the floor, he quickly unlocked the irons from about his ankles, and, freed now from all fetters, tip-toed to the door.

All was silent!

Satisfied that the sounds of the struggle had not reached the deck, Dass returned to the ominously still figure of the steward, and dropping to one knee, he placed his hand over the region of the man's heart.

"Not dead!" he muttered. "But I had to take the risk. Even the law of the white men cannot hang me twice! This son of mud will not recover soon enough to betray me!"

He hurriedly stripped the body of its steward's uniform, and throwing off his own tattered garments, rapidly changed into the blue-and-white robes.

Next he felt in the pockets of the tunic, and a murmur of satisfaction left his lips as he pulled out a small pair of scissors. He knelt beside the steward and trimmed the man's beard into a similar shape to his own. The task finished, he viewed his handiwork with satisfaction.

The horror of strangulation had distorted the face of the steward to such an extent as to make the features unrecognisable.

Dass dressed the man in his own tattered shirt and dhoti. Picking up the irons, he locked them round the steward's wrists and ankles, and then took up a coil of thin rope. Exerting his strength, he broke the rope in two and tied one half to a hook which hung in the ceiling. The other end he fastened round the throat of the half-strangled man and dragged the body beneath the hook.

Then, with a triumphant laugh, he left the cell, locking the door behind him.

"They will be fooled!" he muttered.

Out in the passage he paused, listening intently. But except for the songs of the Arabs as they laboured and the rumble of coal sliding

down the ship's bunkers, all was silent, and he made his way to the saloon.

The place was deserted, for, tiffin over, the stewards had gone to the native galley, which lay aft, for their own meal, and Dass passed unseen through the saloon to a corridor leading to the cabins.

Robbery was his motive now, for without money he would be helpless in a strange country. His own had been taken from him by Blake and handed to the purser, so he was now penniless.

Walking silently along the carpeted corridor he halted before a cabin-door and cautiously tried the handle. It opened to his touch, and, after peering inside and finding it empty, stealthily entered.

An attache case lay on the bunk and Dass tried the catch. It was locked. With a muttered imprecation he crossed to the washstand. Upon it lay a razor, and taking the instrument from its case, he quickly ripped the attache-case open.

Pushing his brown hand through the gap Dass brought out several articles of jewellery and a fat leather wallet. Opening the latter he glanced at the contents and his eyes lit up with satisfaction.

"The luck has changed," he muttered, his eyes now holding something of the old roguish smile, his shoulders once more erect. "I fancy that Mr. Sexton Blake will arrive in England without me, for this money will help me to escape. It will do more! It will help me follow him to England upon a later boat and exact my revenge! Through him I have lost caste, and am fleeing from the vengeance of my own Temple!"

He raised aloft his clawing hands and his face became distorted with hatred.

"Had it not been for that cursed Blake I should have been rich beyond the dreams of avarice. But now I am an outcast, and it is impossible for me to return to my own country, for it would mean certain death should I be recognised. Henceforth, I will track the white man and the thrice-cursed chota-sahib as the mongoose tracks the cobra, and when I strike, my sting shall prove as deadly!"

Thrusting the wallet and jewellery into his pocket, Dass hurriedly left the cabin and walked calmly amidships. Being clad in the uniform of the company's stewards he passed the quartermaster on the gangway without question, and, chartering a dinghy, was soon being rapidly rowed towards the quay side.

"I wish you would look into this, Mr. Blake. This gentleman's cabin has been rifled and the sum of a thousand pounds in Indian notes, besides a quantity of his wife's jewels, has been stolen!"

It was the captain of the boat who uttered those startling words as, an hour later, Blake and Tinker returned aboard. As they entered

the saloon their attention had been arrested by an argument which was taking place between the captain and one of the passengers, a stout, red-faced man bearing the stamp of the Indian Civil Service.

"When was this discovered?" Blake asked.

"A few minutes ago," fumed the excited passenger. "My wife and I went ashore after tiffin, and when we returned we found that our attache case, containing the money and jewels, had been ripped open!"

"I will look into the matter in a few minutes," said the detective. "At present I have just returned to the boat, and must go and see to my prisoner."

He turned to Tinker.

"Go and get the key from Gahana, young 'un," he said.

Tinker hurried off to the saloon. Gahana was nowhere to be found, so he approached the chief steward.

"Where is Gahana?" he asked.

"I cannot say, sahib," the man replied. "Since tiffin he has been absent. I saw him go ashore about an hour ago, but he has not yet returned."

"Not returned? And we sail in five minutes! That's strange!"

"It is very strange, sahib. It looks as if Gahana has deserted. The captain sahib will not wait for him, as we are carrying mails."

"How long has Gahana been with the company?" demanded Tinker.

"Gahana has been with the company for five years, sahib. It seems almost impossible that he should desert his ship. He was to be made second steward next trip."

"Are you sure he went ashore?" Tinker asked. "Shouldn't he have been on duty?"

"Yes, sahib. But I saw him go down the gangway myself. His back was turned to me, but I could not mistake his figure, as he is much taller than any other man on my staff. Being busy at the time, and thinking he might only be going on an errand for one of the passengers, I did not question him."

"He had the keys of the after-hold cells, and our prisoner's irons on him! Who has the master key? I don't like the look of this at all!" Tinker said.

"The mate, sahib. I will send one of my men for him."

The chief steward dispatched one of his staff for the mate as Sexton Blake entered the saloon, followed by the captain.

"What's the matter, young 'un? You're the dickens of a time getting the keys!"

Tinker told his master of Gahana's supposed desertion.

"Gahana a deserter!" said the captain.

"He's the last man aboard I should have thought capable of it. The rascal evidently rifled the cabin before he left!"

The mate entered the saloon.

"I want you to loan me the master key of the after-hold," Blake said. "There is something about this affair I don't like. Gahana had the keys you previously lent me, and it is

possible he assisted my prisoner to escape before he left the boat!"

The mate whistled softly as he handed the detective a bunch of master keys.

"You will excuse me, Mr. Blake," said the captain, "I must get my boat under way at once, for we are late already. The mate will go with you to the hold if you wish it. I will see you later."

The detective nodded, and as the captain left the saloon the mate led the way to the hold. Unlocking the cell door, Blake flung it open.

On the threshold he paused.

"By Heaven!" he gasped. "Dass has attempted suicide!"

Hurrying forward he dropped to his knees beside the still figure. After removing the rope fastened around the brown neck he placed his hand over the region of the man's heart. Then he straightened himself, his eyes roving round the cell in a quick, comprehensive glance.

"The man is unconscious, but will soon recover," he said. "There is little doubt that it is Dass, although strangulation has distorted his face beyond recognition. I think you had better fetch the ship's doctor, mate."

The mate hurried off.

"So Dass has tried to cheat the gallows and failed, guv'nor! It is clearly a case of attempted suicide."

"It looks very much like it, my lad. Ships' irons permit a certain freedom of movement, and Dass evidently found that coil of rope in one of those packing-cases. The rope was not sufficiently strong to bear his weight, though, and broke just in time to save, for a time, his worthless life."

The doctor entered the room and made a swift examination of the half-strangled man.

"He will be all right soon," he said briefly. "Have him carried to the isolation hospital, aft. I will get him round in half an hour."

As the unconscious man was carried aft, Blake and Tinker walked to the rifled cabin. The ship was now under way, and the shores of Egypt showing but faintly on the horizon.

Their investigations yielded but little result.

"I am afraid the only thing to do is to notify the Egyptian police of Gahana's description, and get them to keep watch for him,"

Blake said, addressing the furious passenger. "It seems almost certain that Gahana is guilty. Otherwise, why should he desert his boat? I should go at once to the wireless cabin and get the operator on duty to get a message through before the man has time to get inland, or sign on for some other ship."

There came the patter of running feet along the corridor, and the door opened to admit the ship's doctor. The man's face was flushed with excitement, his eyes bewildered.

"The man I have in the hospital is not your prisoner, Mr. Blake!" he cried. "It is Gahana, the steward!"

Blake sprang forward and gripped the doctor by the arm.

"What!" he shouted. "Not Dass? By Heaven, what trickery is this?"

He rushed from the cabin, with Tinker and the doctor close at his heels. Entering the hospital, he bent over the still unconscious figure of the steward. The distortion was leaving the dusky face, and Blake watched, spellbound, as the rigid lines smoothed out before his eyes, revealing more plainly every moment the well-known features of Gahana!

"Come, Tinker! We will get to the wireless cabin at once! I see now how we have been tricked. Dass attacked this man when he took his food, faked the clues which led us to believe he had committed suicide, and half strangled the unfortunate steward, so that his face would become unrecognisable."

"But the chief steward said he saw Gahana go ashore, sir."

Blake laughed bitterly.

"Dass and Gahana were about the same build, lad," he said in chagrined

tones. "Dass evidently disguised himself as Gahana. One Hindoo looks much the same as another—the type is so pronounced. But let us get to the wireless cabin at once. There is a possibility that they may be able to arrest him. It is but a poor hope, though, for Port Said harbours the scum of all nations in its native quarters, and as Dass is evidently the man who rifled the cabin he will not be short of funds or friends."

They hurried to the "monkey island," and the operator was soon in connection with the Egyptian police headquarters at Port Said.



A TALE OF MYSTERY AND THRILLING ADVENTURE.

No. 202.

NOW ON SALE.

The officer in charge was flashed a full description of Dass, and he promised to get his men out at once and notify Blake of the result of their investigations.

With this somewhat forlorn hope the detectives had to be content, and they hurried back to the hospital. Gahana was recovering from the murderous attack when they arrived, and was soon able to tell his story.

"You are not to blame, Gahana," Blake said, when the Hindoo came to the end of his narrative. "I blame myself for going ashore. Unfortunately, I under-estimated the scoundrel's cunning. One day we shall probably meet again, and then Gunga Dass shall pay in full. The man is an utter scoundrel, and apparently holds human life too cheaply to be allowed to remain at large. He is a menace to society, and until he has expiated his crimes on the scaffold I shall not be content."

CHAPTER 14.

Tried for Her Life—The Delayed Cablegram—The Dramatic Arrival of Sexton Blake.

"THAT, my lord and gentlemen of the jury, is the case for the Crown!"

Sir Marland Joyce, K.C., a "silk" of renown, had just concluded his speech in the packed Court of Assize, on the second day of Lady Hartley's trial. Presiding over that Court, aroused to feverish interest in this mysterious case of a beautiful woman, a prominent member of English society, facing her trial on the charge of having murdered a blackmailing native of India, was the dignified figure of Mr. Justice Ratcliffe, who, with the jury, had listened intently the previous day to the evidence which seemed so damning against the prisoner.

That evidence had shown that her ladyship had received a threatening and blackmailing letter from the man found stabbed in her room—stabbed by a weapon which she had not denied was her own. Her blunt refusal to give information concerning the dead Hindoo, in face of the strong evidence that there had been a former acquaintance between them, had told heavily against her. Yet in that

refusal she had persisted with a determination which had sent curiosity up to fever-heat.

Who had been this mysterious "black man" she was accused of killing to prevent some "secret" being divulged to the world, or, alternatively, freeing herself from his blackmailing clutches?

What connection had the man with the past of Sir Edward Hartley's beautiful widow?

Those were questions which only her ladyship could answer—and on which she was dumb, even though her refusal to speak should send her to a woman's convict prison for the remainder of her life.

She was seated now in the prisoner's dock, her beautiful face Madonna-like in its pensive calm, expressive of a soul unstirred by the danger in which Fate had placed her—a soul of one supreme purpose formed, from which not death itself should turn her.

"Heaven grant me strength!" she murmured. "Only strength—and then I will not fail!"

Her eyes for a moment dwelt upon the pale and anxious face of Lillah, her child, who was seated in the court by Jim Currier's side, and they became filled with the light of a wondrous tenderness as they turned again to the stern, impassive face of her judge.

With rustling gown Graham Wylde rose to his feet. It was the moment for him to bring forward whatever defence for the prisoner lay in his power.

"I regret, my lord, that it is impossible for me to open the case for the defence. Mr. Sexton Blake, the celebrated criminologist, of Baker Street, and my chief witness for the defence, has not yet arrived. I have good reason to believe that he is on his way from India with evidence of my client's innocence, and as proof of my statement I submit this cablegram to your lordship's notice. It should have reached me a considerable time ago, but, by an unfortunate sequence of accidents, has been considerably delayed."

The clerk of the Court stepped forward and took the cablegram from the defending counsel's hand. A murmur of suppressed excitement ran round the crowded court at this fresh development in the most sensational trial of the year.

"Silence in court!" shouted the usher.

Adjusting his gold-rimmed glasses on the tip

of his nose, with aggravating slowness the clerk of the Court peered intently at the cablegram. He read it aloud to the Court:

"Postpone trial of Lady Hartley. Sailing with irrefutable evidence of her innocence.

"SEXTON BLAKE."

"But this—this is very irregular," said his lordship.

"I am in your lordship's hands. I know no more at present than that Sexton Blake, one of the most famous detectives of modern times, sailed some weeks ago for India, on the track of the man he suspected of having been implicated in this crime. Now he— My lord, Sexton Blake is here!"

A commotion sounded from the rear of the court, and all eyes turned towards the door. It opened to admit the figures of a man and a boy.

Lady Hartley swayed slightly, as if an icy fear swept through her. She tightly gripped the dock rails.

"It is Sexton Blake and that brave boy Tinker!" Lillah whispered to Jim. "Thank Heaven they have safely returned!"

A hum of excited conversation, which the usher was powerless to subdue, rose from the packed court as the detective, followed by his assistant, hurried towards the bench.

"I crave your indulgence for any delay I have caused, my lord," Blake said, bowing towards the judge. "My boat met with stormy weather in the Bay of Biscay, and was unfortunately delayed. In my possession I have irrefutable evidence of Lady Hartley's innocence. Have I your lordship's permission to enter the witness-box?"

The judge assented, and, duly sworn, the detective stepped into the box. His eyes met those of Zenda for a moment, and in their liquid depths he read a message of tragic appeal. But something in his own grey eyes told the unhappy woman that her fears were groundless, and a smile of hope, which had been absent for many a day, wreathed her sad face.

The hum of conversation abruptly ceased as the detective turned towards his lordship and said:

"My lord and gentlemen, in my possession I have the attested confession of the person who is guilty of the murder of the Hindoo, Bhur Singh!"

Blake then revealed to the Court the result of his investigations at the Larches, only withholding those points which, whilst not material to the evidence, would have betrayed the Parsee origin of Zenda.

He then resumed:

"The name of the unfortunate man, as I have explained, was Bhur Singh, a priest of Kali, one of the chief deities of the Hindoo faith. Lady Hartley became possessed, many years ago, of a peerless ruby which formed the eye of the idol of the deity, in the Temple of Khan Dur. It was stolen, but came into the hands of her ladyship in an entirely innocent manner—a gift, in fact, from a dear friend."

He paused and glanced at Lady Hartley. A startled light flamed in the amber-brown eyes; then her troubled face cleared. It was as though in that moment she felt lifted from her the weight of a fresh fear. Yet her linked hands and twitching lips, as she glanced at her daughter, told that she was worried still.

"Bhur Singh," resumed the detective, "hearing that the sacred ruby was in England, and in the possession of her ladyship, blackmailed her for its return. This was the first time the history of the jewel became known to her, and she gladly arranged an interview with the priest, so that the ruby could be handed to him. Bhur Singh kept that appointment, accompanied by his servant, also a Hindoo.

"The name of this servant was Gunga Dass. As Lady Hartley handed the stone to Singh he threatened her with the vengeance of the high priests of the Temple, and, overcome by horror, she fainted. Gunga Dass, a Thug of the worst type, then crept behind his master and, snatching up a jewelled paper-knife belonging to her ladyship, ruthlessly stabbed him for the possession of the ruby. The man fled to India, and after a series of adventures my assistant and I were successful in getting on his trail. We took him before the Commissioner of Madras, and the man signed a confession of his guilt. Your lordship will see that the confession is drawn up in a legal manner and bears the official seal of the Commissioner."

The detective took the official-looking document from his pocket and handed it to the clerk of the court.

"You may stand down, Mr. Blake," said the judge. "Your evidence has been of a startling nature. Let this document be read aloud to the jury."

The detective bowed and, leaving the witness-box, seated himself beside Graham Wylde.

The clerk of the Court polished his glasses; then read the confession to the Court:

"I, Gunga Dass, native of India and of Hindoo caste, have been duly warned by the Commissioner of Madras that any statement I may make will be used as evidence against me. The following confession of my guilt has been written voluntarily, and I alone am responsible for the murder of my master, Bhur Singh. My master was commissioned by the high priests of Kali to journey to England and recover the Eye of our goddess, which had been traced as being in the possession of Lady Hartley. On the night the Eye was handed to my master I stabbed him with a dagger belonging to the mem-sahib. My motive for the crime was robbery. I sign this without extortion.—Gunga Dass."

The clerk examined the document closely, and turning towards his lordship, said:

"This confession is legally correct, my lord, and bears the signature and official seal of the Commissioner of Madras. Also the signature of a Hindoo barrister of known integrity."

He landed the confession to his lordship, who, after examining it, handed it to the foreman of the jury.

Sexton Blake was then recalled.

"Where is this man, Gunga Dass, Mr. Blake?" asked his lordship. "Surely you were able to obtain extradition papers, and bring him to England?"

"I regret to state, my lord, that my prisoner escaped from his irons and cell by means of a cunning trick while my boat was coaling up at Port Said," Blake said, a hint of bitterness in his voice. "Dass attacked the steward who was detailed to take him his food and, impersonating the man, he escaped. I was not aware of this until we were out at sea again, so all I could do was to notify the Egyptian police by wireless. They will exert every effort to recapture the scoundrel."

Sir Marland Joyce, counsel for the Crown, rose to his feet.

"In what way, Mr. Blake, did you induce Dass to make this confession?" he asked.

"He preferred to be extradited for trial to remaining in India, where, after what he had done, his life was in danger."

Graham Wylde rose to his feet and, turning to the Bench, said:

"I submit, my lord, that this confession is ample proof of my client's innocence. The defence she advanced at the inquest was simply that she fainted when threatened by the dead man, and so was in ignorance of what afterwards occurred. It is clear that, as she lay unconscious, Bhur Singh was done to death by his native servant, Gunga Dass, who has confessed his guilt. I ask for my client's discharge!"

"Have you any questions to ask this witness, Sir Marland?" inquired his lordship.

"My cross-examination will be brief, my lord!" said the eminent K.C.; and after he had asked Blake a few questions he bade him stand down.

His lordship turned to the jury.

"The evidence you have just heard explains satisfactorily the circumstantial evidence upon which Lady Hartley was arrested," his lordship said. "I now ask you to deliver your verdict."

His lordship briefly summed up the evidence, paying a tribute to the great detective who had braved such perilous adventures to obtain the sensational confession which had just been read.

The foreman of the jury, after a brief discussion with his colleagues, rose to his feet to deliver the verdict, and a pin might have been heard fall in that crowded court.

He spoke crisply and decisively.

"We find the prisoner not guilty, my lord!"

There was a sound of excitement in the court, followed by applause, which, under the thrilling circumstances, his lordship did not check.

He then turned towards the pale-faced woman in the dock.

"Lady Hartley, you are discharged! And without a stain upon your reputation and your name!"

And swaying dazedly, her beautiful face like death, Zenda tottered from the dock into Lillah's waiting arms.

CHAPTER 15.

**A Mother's Agony—Right is Right—How
Sexton Blake Won His Way.**

"MOTHER!" breathed Lillah softly, happily.

The warm young arms were encircling Zenda, the "little mother" between whom and herself had always been perfect love, perfect understanding, until this shadow of the mysterious ruby and the crime, red as the famous stone, which had followed in its train, had come between them.

•But now, thanks to Sexton Blake and his young assistant, Tinker, that shadow was dispersed; the sun shone once more upon a happy home, an undimmed future for Lillah.

"My dear!" the girl said softly. "How cruel that you should have suffered so—you, who were innocent! How bravely you bore it, mother! Thank Heaven you are cleared at last, and with your girlie again."

Lillah, as did all the world, believed that the tragedy of that night began and ended with what Sexton Blake had revealed in his evidence at her mother's trial.

Her mother had become possessed of this religious stone quite innocently—it had been a gift to her from some "dear friend" in India, and she had received it, little knowing of its history. The man, Bhur Singh, had traced it to England and had demanded it from Lady Hartley, who had been quite willing to restore it when she knew its nature. She had gone to her daughter's room to gain the stone, but on returning had swooned.

Then Bhur Singh's treacherous servant had entered, had stabbed his master, and made off with the ruby.

That was what Blake had told the court in his evidence—just that and nothing more. As for the threatening letter Singh had written to Zenda, suggesting that she had a secret which the writer could betray to the world, Blake had worded his explanation of that "secret" in such a way as to give the impression that no more was meant than the fact that Lady Hartley was in possession of the missing Kali Ruby—the Eye of the goddess of the jungle temple.

Of Lady Hartley's Parsee origin the Baker Street detective had not breathed a word—not even to Rollings, of the Yard. Only three people

in England knew the nature of that real "secret" in her ladyship's romantic life—Blake, Tinker, and Zenda herself.

"Did you believe me innocent, Lillah?" Zenda said, in that soft, sweet voice which, twenty-odd years ago, in sun-burnt India, had sounded as earth's sweetest music to the ears of Edward Hartley.

"Yes—always, darling!"

"And Jim?"

"Of course!" Lillah laughed. "Jim was furious with the police for even suspecting you. I'm sure, if I hadn't talked to him very earnestly, he would have committed assault and battery upon Inspector Mulberry!"

The two laughed together, the beautiful mother and the lovely child. In Zenda's heart there was a feeling of triumph and exultation. She had kept her fateful secret hidden—that secret she would have sacrificed liberty, even life, to keep intact.

"No one will know it now," she thought. "The happiness of Lillah is assured—the tongues of society in England cannot sneer at her as a Eurasian! I thank Heaven I had the courage to dare all, rather than tell the truth!"

"But, mother mine," continued the girl softly, "the most wonderful belief in your innocence was that of Sexton Blake! What a wonderful man he is! What stirring adventures he has been through in our cause—for Jim has told me all that Mr. Blake and that brave boy, Tinker, went through in their hunt for Gunga Dass. He— But, mother, why do you look so cold—stern, when I mention Mr. Blake, our best friend?"

Lady Hartley's expression had greatly changed; from one of light-heartedness it had become one of apprehension, almost of fear.

"Nothing, my dear—of course, I appreciate Mr. Blake's services—"

"Services? Why, he did it out of pure friendship for dear old Jim, mother!" Lillah's tone was a little shocked.

"I do not like these detectives—do not trust them," Zenda said coldly.

"It was so strange, mother, that you did not wish Mr. Blake to interfere in the case—"

"It was because I feared he might do more harm than good, Lillah. I wished to leave it to the police."

Lillah accepted the explanation, but there was one other small matter in which she was in doubt—the attitude of her mother had in several ways appeared strange.

"Mother, when you came to my room to get the ruby that night—the night of the dinner, and—when that man was killed—why didn't you rouse the house and have him turned out by the servants?"

"You do not understand, Lillah, what a terrible position I was in. I was in possession of an Indian religious stone and the priests of Kali would have exacted a terrible vengeance had I not returned it. I was anxious to get rid of the wretched thing and have that man go quietly. I acted as I did, believing it to be for the best."

"Oh, I see—I understand all now," said the girl. And in the excess of her joy and happiness her arms encircled Zenda again.

"Mr. Sexton Blake, your ladyship," announced Jenkins at the door; and the famous detective stepped into the room.

As he entered, it was hard for Blake to judge which was the lovelier of those two women who, with clinging arms, and faces resting side by side, sat in the old library of the Larches in the soft glow of the evening sunset that streamed in through the wide window from the wooded grounds.

The young face, bewitching in its bloom of youth, or the older one, mellowed by time and maturity, and bearing that stamp of rarer beauty which is born of less selfish thoughts and loves than youth can know.

And on Blake's face was the look of a man who had some un congenial task to perform—the detective felt as one about to desolate a heart awakening from fear to happiness and content.

It was as though the elder woman felt it, though Sexton Blake was smiling as he advanced to greet them; and in a few well-chosen words he congratulated Lady Hartley on her acquittal and the clearing of her name.

"Which, Lillah tells me, Mr. Blake, I owe solely to you," Zenda said. "Believe me, I am very grateful—"

She was looking at him with a hunted look. In her heart she feared this man. She felt that Blake, in his investigation of the case in India, must have learned more of her past than

he had revealed to the judge and jury in the Assize Court.

"Lillah, darling," Zenda said, "I think Mr. Blake may have something to say to me—alone!"

The girl rose, and at once left the room. Sexton Blake responded to an invitation waved to him with a fair wrist and white hand, still softly rounded and delicate as those of a girl.

"Your ladyship is right," he said in low tones, as he took a seat beside her. "What I have to say to you concerns your 'secret,' Lady Hartley!"

"My—my secret? Surely, you explained that in court, Mr. Blake?" She had turned paler.

"I explained in court all I wished the world to know of your past," Blake said. "But there are others who should know—more!"

"My—past?"

"You are a Parsee by birth—you were by religion when you married Edward Hartley. You have kept that a secret from the world for over twenty years. Rather than have that secret divulged you would have suffered for a crime of which you were innocent—and of which you knew you were innocent."

The fair hand—fair as that of a Western woman—toyed with the tassel of the cushion which separated her from him. Her face was bent, but he saw the tell-tale colour sweep in full tide to the neck and throat. A sound came from the lowered, tremulous lips like a stifled cry of mercy.

"When—how did you find out this?"

"When? Before I went to India. How? I merely used my observation and my knowledge of Eastern races. In India I found my deductions verified, your ladyship."

She raised her face, and now it was defiant; the splendid, amber-brown eyes looked at him as those of some lovely bird who sees advance the despoiler of her nest.

"Well, and what then? It is my secret, Mr. Blake. I am grateful that you did not reveal it in court. But now you say—someone—some others should know——"

"I refer to Sir John Currier, and Jim. It is hardly fair that they should be kept in the dark——"

Now, as he saw the white hands go in surrender to her face, as he saw her shoulders

heave in the silent sob she was too proud to let him hear; as the pride of her gave way to humility, the stern look faded from his face.

"Lady Hartley, don't put me down as one of those narrow-minded men who would scorn either you or your daughter because of your Eastern blood. I have every respect for you, every sympathy—even, dear lady, a great admiration. If young Currier were my son, believe me, I should be proud to see him become yours, by marriage, too. But—he is Sir John Currier's son!"

"Mr. Blake!" She took her hands from her face, and threw them out to him; and he saw how entrancingly lovely those wonderful eyes could look all filled with tears. "It is just because he is Sir John Currier's son that I have kept silent—that I would have died rather than reveal my secret—" She paused, in great agitation. But Blake had taken the impulsively thrown-out hands, and pressed them in silent sympathy.

"Lady Hartley, I have guessed this. Sir John is a deeply-prejudiced old man—deeply prejudiced on the colour question—"

"He—he would call my girl—my sweet, pretty one—a 'nigger!' " she moaned. "I could not bear it. It would break my child's heart. Have pity on me, Mr. Blake. Don't force me to tell them. Think of Lillah's happiness, her future, so full of promise, utterly ruined!"

"It would be cruel, and unjust, for anyone to so designate either you or your daughter," Blake said. "As a Parsee, you have as good reason to be as proud of your descent as has any English woman of hers—"

"Yes, but that it not how the matter would be looked upon here in England. My child would be ostracised, her husband would suffer—but she would have no husband! If Lillah were to know the truth, she would refuse to marry at all—most certainly would she refuse to marry the son of Sir John Currier, that old man so bitter against all of native blood."

"I think that perhaps you exaggerate his feelings on the question," Blake said.

"I do not!" Her hands clenched passionately. "Mr. Blake, but for him, and the bitter things I have heard him say about inter-marriage between Englishmen and native women in India, I should have revealed Lillah's

Eurasian blood to Jim. I believe that the boy would not be as his father—that his love for Lillah would remain true and loyal. But—with such a father—"

"Still, Lady Hartley, right is right. And it is not right to let Sir John's son marry your daughter in ignorance of the truth."

"Then with those words you condemn Lillah and me to lifelong misery!" There was a tremor in the sweet voice. "I believe you to be my friend—believe that you are speaking as a friend; but I ask you, is it just to Lillah? The girl is as English as her father was—British in heart, in education, in sympathy. Do you realise what a terrible blow it would be for her?"

Blake compressed his lips.

"I do—more than you, I think, realise what it might mean for your children when you married an Englishman!"

The taunt in his voice did not anger her; rather, it melted her. Blake had long since released her hands, but now she again laid one of hers on his.

"Yes, you are right in that," she said. "And in that I deserve your condemnation. But let me tell you my story, Mr. Blake—tell it for the first time it has ever been told to living ears—and perhaps the last time!"

And then she told him all about that Eastern romance of over a score years ago. And when she had finished, she said:

"If I had to live it over again, I should do just as I did then. But is it fair that my child should suffer?"

Sexton Blake rose to his feet, his eyes luminous with sympathy, but his inflexible will as iron still.

"Sir John and Jim must be told," he said softly. "Lady Hartley, will you leave the telling of it in my hands?" He held out his hand to her in farewell. "I promise you," he said, "that none but those two shall ever know."

"But—Lillah—"

"She shall not know! They are men of honour, Lady Hartley, and the promise I shall demand of them will be kept, whatever their attitude upon the question may be."

"Then—I am content," she sighed. "Dear

friend, you have served me and mine so faithfully, I leave all to you."

Their eyes met. As he saw the amber lights turning in hers to molten gold, the sweet, pensive lines of her lips move with the saddest of smiles, Sexton Blake glimpsed a little of that Eastern love story, and of the spell that had fallen upon an Englishman twenty years ago, leading him to give up all for such a love as that of this Eastern maid.

"Well, Blake, and what's this yarn you've picked up in India—this little romance you want to tell us?" said old Sir John Currier, as he, Blake and Jim sat over their cigars in the drawing-room of the old Indian Commissioner's house after dinner that night.

Blake had called and had stayed to dinner. The Grey Panther which had borne him down from London was garaged at the inn in the village at which he and Tinker had previously stayed. And at dinner, after discussing the case of the "nigger's" murder by his servant, Gunga Daes, and mutual congratulations that Lady Hartley had been cleared, Blake had surprised Jim and his father by saying that he had an "Eastern romance" to tell them.

"Fire away, Blake," laughed Jim. "New role of yours, telling Eastern love stories—what?"

"I think this one will interest you both," Sexton Blake said quietly. "But, first, I must have your word of honour that it will never be divulged by either of you to any living soul."

"We give that," said the older man. "But what's this confounded mystery about, Blake? Don't keep me in suspense, man—excitement's bad for this confounded gout—"

"A little more than twenty years ago," said Blake, "a young Englishman was in India on pleasure. He was attacked by a tiger in the jungle, found by an old Parsee merchant, and borne by the Parsee's bearers to his home. There he was nursed slowly back to health by the Parsee's beautiful daughter—"

"If you are going to spring one of those cursed inter-marriages of the black and white races on me, Blake—" began the old man angrily.

"The girl was not black; she was as fair—fairer—than many English women," Blake said.

"Did he marry her?"

"He did—"

"Ugh! Then I don't want to hear any more—"

"You have got to hear me to the end," Blake said. "This Parsee maid was beautiful, and she had received a liberal English education. Come, Sir John;—you must not let prejudice blind you to the fact that all the native races of India are not 'niggers.' I grant you that in administrative work there the colour line, as it's called, has to be sharply drawn. But here in England it is not so, and fair is fair—"

"And East is East, and West is West, Blake," grunted Sir John. "Well?"

"For long the girl refused. She was reluctant to place upon this young Englishman whom she loved the stigma of her Eastern origin. But love prevailed. She eventually renounced her religion, her faith, and became of his. Currier, this is a grim, prosaic old world of ours, but let us for a moment place ourselves in the rosy glow of this love of two young hearts; let us view it through the tinted glasses of youth, and forget our prejudices for a time. Is there not something beautiful in a love which counts no sacrifice, which gives up all?"

"I agree with you, Blake," Jim said quietly.

"Young calf in love—bound to," grunted Sir John. "Old man like me got more sense. Get along, Blake—I'm sick of the yarn already!"

"I have always thought," Sexton Blake said, blowing out a cloud of smoke, and gazing dreamily at it as it curled and gyrated in the air above him—"I have always thought the most beautiful passage in the Bible is that where Ruth—but you will recall it."

They were listening now in silence.

"She married him, and they sailed for England. Here no one suspected that his beautiful Parsee bride was other than of British blood; their secret was kept for the sake of the children who might come of that Eastern marriage. Before the bride sailed her father gave her a jewel—a certain ruby, which she took innocently, little dreaming that it was the missing Eye of the goddess Kali—"

"My Heaven, Blake, what is this?" gasped Sir John, springing to his feet. "What—oh

confound this gout!" He sat down again. "What——"

"I have told you the story of Zenda Agran—the woman you know now as Lady Hartley!"

"Lady Hartley, my neighbour, my friend—a nigger?" gasped the old man, whilst Jim sat white, spellbound.

"No, not a 'nigger,' as you term it, Currier; a beautiful, accomplished, and educated Parsee—the bride whom Edward Hartley chose of all women in the world!"

Sir John gave a bitter groan.

"Then the girl my boy is to marry—was to have married," he corrected—"is a Eurasian?"

"Yes—also the daughter of one of the noblest women who ever lived. Zenda's love is again the story of Ruth—a story that has awakened tears in nearly every human heart. To her beloved she gave all, and counted not the cost: 'Entreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee; for whither thou goest I will go; where thou lodgest I will lodge; thy people shall be my people; thy God my God. Where thou diest I will die. The Lord do so to me, and more also, if aught but death part thee and me!'"

"Nothing but death parted those two," continued Sexton Blake. "Here in England they lived their lives. When he died, the great love of Zenda turned upon her daughter. You know the rest. Sir John, that daughter loves your son. Jim, what have you to say?"

Jim rose, his eyes glistening.

"Only this, Blake—that Lillah is even dearer to me now than she was before!"

"I knew she would be," Blake said softly.

Sir John gripped hard on the arms of his chair. His face had turned purple.

"My Heaven, Jim, this cannot go on! That girl and you! My son married to——"

"I see that you do not realise all yet," Blake cut in sharply. "I have said that when Sir Edward died his wife's love centred upon her child and his. For Lillah Zendah lived—for her she would have died!"

"Why—what do you mean?" spluttered the old man.

"That was the secret Bhur Singh tried to blackmail her upon, Sir John—the threat that he would reveal her Parsee origin to the world here in England. Zenda knew that she had not killed the man, but if she cleared herself

by revealing Singh's identity, and the nature of his threat, she would have betrayed to you and Jim that Lillah was a Eurasian. She knew of your black and bitter prejudice against native blood, and, rather than wreck her child's happiness, she was prepared to lay down a life that had become empty, since the man she loved was gone from it.

"She would have sacrificed herself to save the unhappiness of her Englishman's child!"

Sir John sat back in his chair and closed his eyes. A great struggle was going on in that prejudiced old heart, but that Blake's story had moved him could be plainly seen by his twitching lips.

Blake rose and moved towards the door.

"I have told you all," he said, "and, whatever decision you and Jim come to about this, I am convinced that you will guard the truth from Lillah, whose heart would break if she knew. If I were in your place, Sir John, I would be proud to see my son married to the daughter of such a woman as Zenda Hartley. I think, when you have reflected upon it from all points of view, you will be proud of it also."

Sir John looked up with a troubled face.

"Blake, this is a blow to me. I—I agree with all you say. Lady Hartley is—well, as a woman, she commands my admiration and respect. But as a Parsee——"

"Think of her as an unselfish lover, a perfect wife, a glorious mother, Sir John!"

"Umph!"

Jim winked at the detective, and went to his old dad's chair. There, laying a hand on Sir John's bowed shoulders, the young man said:

"I agree with my father, Mr. Blake. I owe my first duty to him, and to his prejudices. And, that being so, I refuse to let my engagement to Lillah continue——"

"What?" roared Sir John. He sprang up. "What—oh-h!—blister this confounded gout! Mean to say you'll jilt that sweet girl—give her up and break her heart? My Heaven, Jim,

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if you do, I'll never own you again as a son of mine!"

It was a week later that Sexton Blake, at Baker Street, received two letters. The one was from Zenda, thanking him in moving words for what he had done.

"I saw Sir John yesterday," she wrote. "He was so kind and sweet to me, Mr. Blake—it moved me to tears. He reviled himself for his bitter speeches—said how he must unwittingly have wrenched my heart. But he is quite changed; all his old prejudices have gone.

"More than all am I thankful that Lillah will never know. Mr. Blake, I cannot say what I feel. But long ago my, dear husband, for whom I left country, faith and friends, taught me to pray to the Great Creator, and I do so now for all my dear friends. From now two more will be included in Zenda's prayers—Sexton Blake and the brave lad who risked their lives to clear a mother's name and save her daughter from a broken heart. May God always bless you, dear friends, and hold you safe!

"ZENDA HARTLEY."

The other was from Jim, and ran thus:

"Dear Blake,—The old dad has come round like an angel. Lillah and I are to be married in a month, and nothing will satisfy my darling but that you and Master Tinker—and Pedro—

come to the wedding. So don't forget the date, old man.—Yours ever gratefully, JIM."

Tinker, who had been thoughtfully stroking Pedro's ears as Blake read this last letter aloud, looked up and said:

"There you go again! I say, guv'nor, don't you think we'd better chuck the detective line and start a bally matrimonial agency? We'd do fine! I suppose this means another wedding present? As soon as we earn a fee, the clients go and do silly things like this—and bang goes our money!"

Blake laughed.

"I saw a nice little diamond tiara in Oxford Street yesterday, Tinker. Only thirty guineas. Shall we go halves?"

"Certainly," agreed Tinker promptly. "We'll have the thirty-guinea tarara—diamonds would look fine in Miss Lillah's hair. We'll whack it right enough, guv'nor—you find the quids and I'll find the bobs! But what I don't like, in the midst of all this rosy stuff, is that chap Dass getting away. I'll never forget the look on his face last time, guv'nor; it was a look that meant murder if ever he gets across the path of little us again!"

"It is strange that you should mention it, Tinker," Sexton Blake said gravely, "for something tells me we have not seen the last of Gunga Dass!"

THE END.



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